

SL/ST-PAAT Questions and Answers

The following questions and answers provide instructions and explanations for agencies using the Senior Level (SL) and Scientific and Professional (ST) Performance Appraisal Assessment Tool (SL/ST-PAAT) to request certification of their appraisal systems. This includes questions based on agency inquiries.

Table of Contents

General	1
Accountability	4
Alignment	5
Measurable Results	6
Balanced Measures (Customer and Employee Perspectives)	8
Consultation	8
Organizational Assessment and Guidelines	9
Oversight	10
Training	10
Performance Differentiation	11
Pay Differentiation	12
Federal Human Capital Survey Results	Error! Bookmark not defined.

General

Q1. What is the purpose of the SL/ST-PAAT?

Answer: The SL/ST-PAAT is to be used by agencies to evaluate their SL/ST appraisal systems and performance plans against the required system certification criteria and to request certification by OPM, with OMB concurrence. As part of each agency's future request to OPM for certification, agencies will complete this self-assessment tool and submit the results to OPM for review and verification, usually 6 months before the end of the certification period.

Q2. Many SL/ST employees are covered by the agency's appraisal system for its General Schedule and Wage Grade employees, approved by OPM as required in 5 CFR 430 subpart B. Do agencies need to get new SL/ST systems approved by OPM before requesting certification?

Answer: It depends. If an agency has a broad, flexible system approved by OPM in accordance with subpart B of 5 CFR 430, the agency can establish a separate program under that system to cover its SL/ST employees and would therefore not need a new OPM approval. Since subpart D of part 430 of title 5, Code of Federal Regulations defines an appraisal system as consisting of both the system approved under subpart B and its applicable program, OPM would be able to certify the system as it is applied to the SL/ST employees under the program (as long as it meets the certification criteria). However, if the agency's OPM-approved system does not allow multiple programs or does not allow for the options necessary to meet certification criteria, the agency will

SL/ST-PAAT Questions and Answers

need to design a new system for its SL/ST employees and request OPM approval of the system before the system can be certified.

Q3. How often will agencies need to submit the SL/ST-PAAT?

Answer: Once a system is certified, OPM requires the SL/ST-PAAT to be completed and submitted to OPM 6 months prior to the expiration of its current certification to avoid any gaps in certification.

Q4. What must be included in the request package when an agency submits the SL/ST-PAAT for certification review?

Answer: Agencies must provide an electronic copy or 5 hard copies of the following:

- Request letter signed by the agency head or designee;
- The SL/ST performance appraisal system description;
- The completed SL/ST-PAAT;
- Sample SL/ST performance plans, as designated by OPM; and
- Any support documentation as identified in the SL/ST-PAAT sections.

Q5. For SL/ST systems with full certification, how will OPM designate which performance plans the agency must submit?

Answer: For agencies with SL/ST systems with full certification, the agency will contact OPM Excellence in Performance Management (EPM) Group prior to sending the certification request to OPM. An EPM staff member will advise the agency on which performance plans to submit. OPM will identify plans that represent a cross-section of the agency's SL/ST occupations and/or organizations.

Q6. How many sample performance plans will the agency send to OPM for review?

Answer: For agencies with provisional certification or for first-time requests, the agency must send 10 percent of its SL/ST performance plans, or 20 plans, whichever is more. For agencies with full certification, OPM will request a number of performance plans based on the number of SL/ST employees in the agency. Generally, the number of plans submitted with the SL/ST-PAAT for agencies with full certification will be 10 plans for agencies with more than 100 SL/ST employees and 5 plans for agencies with less than 100 employees. OPM may request additional plans, as needed.

Q7. What do agencies need to do to complete the SL/ST-PAAT?

Answer: The agency needs to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of its SL/ST appraisal system and its results. The evaluation needs to include—

- a review of the performance appraisal system description;
- training or briefings delivered to SL/ST employees, rating officials, and review board members, as applicable;

SL/ST-PAAT Questions and Answers

- the assessment of its organizational performance;
- the guidance issued to rating officials and review board members;
- the oversight performed of its performance management system;
- the ratings distribution and pay adjustments authorized; and
- a representative sample of SL/ST performance appraisal plans.

Q8. What does the SL/ST performance appraisal system description need to include for certification?

Answer: The SL/ST appraisal system description must include policy statements that require the following:

- Performance plans for supervisory SL/ST employees include a critical element that holds the SL/ST employee accountable for aligning subordinate performance plans with organizational goals and for rigorously appraising employee performance (for example, employees were appraised realistically against clear, measurable standards of performance and within established time frames);
- SL/ST performance plans clearly link to the agency's mission, GPRA strategic and annual performance goals, program and policy objectives, and/or budget priorities;
- SL/ST performance plans include at least one critical element that holds the employee accountable for achieving results;
- A summary rating derivation formula such that each SL/ST employee's performance plan counts measurable results as at least 60 percent of the summary rating or a derivation methodology where measurable results clearly drive the summary rating;
- Performance plans for supervisory SL/ST employees take into consideration both customer and employee perspectives, and performance plans for non-supervisory SL/ST employees take into consideration customer perspective (employee perspective is not applicable for non-supervisors);
- SL/ST employees shall be encouraged to participate in the development of their performance plans;
- Oversight of the results of ratings, pay adjustments, and awards;
- SL/ST employees receive training on the requirements and operation of the agency's SL/ST pay policy and performance system; and
- Communication of the results of the system's application.

Q9. What must SL/ST employee performance plans include to meet appraisal system certification criteria?

Answer: SL/ST performance plans must include the following:

- A critical element that holds supervisory SL/ST employees accountable for the performance management of subordinates (including aligning subordinate performance plans with organizational goals and for rigorously appraising employee performance)—this is not required for non-supervisors;
- Elements and standards that provide clear, transparent links to organizational goals;

SL/ST-PAAT Questions and Answers

- A summary rating derivation formula that counts measurable results as at least 60 percent of the summary rating;
- Measurable results that are observable and/or demonstrable, and count as at least 60 percent of the summary rating;
- Requirements that take into consideration both customer and employee perspectives for supervisory SL/ST employees, and take into consideration customer perspective for non-supervisory SL/ST employees; and
- An indication that standards were developed with SL/ST employee participation.

Q10. How will the SL/ST-PAAT address the agency's Strategic Plan?

Answer: The SL/ST-PAAT is not designed to evaluate the strengths or weaknesses of the agency's Strategic Plan. For the purposes of performance management accountability, the SL/ST-PAAT reviews whether performance requirements are linked to organizational goals and whether the agency assesses organizational performance. However, the quality of an agency's strategic plan may impact final certification decisions and concurrence.

Accountability

Q11. What methodology should agencies use to review performance plans when preparing to complete sections 6 through 10 of the SL/ST-PAAT?

Answer: For the purposes of the SL/ST-PAAT, OPM requires that agencies with 100 or more SL/ST employees review 50 percent of its SL/ST performance plans; agencies with less than 100 SL/ST employees review 100 percent of its SL/ST plans.

When sampling plans for the agency's SL/ST-PAAT self-assessment, representation is critical. The agency should sample a full range of the occupational series found across the organization. The sample should include performance plans that represent the entire SL/ST employee population including performance plans from across the entire agency, across all locations and components, plans that cover a large number of SL/ST employees, for positions at various levels of responsibility, and for positions that represent different types of work (line versus administrative).

Finally, the agency should review each performance plan and determine whether the plan meets, or does not meet, the certification criteria for alignment, consultation, measurable results, and employee and customer perspective and accountability, as applicable.

Q12. When explaining the review of performance plans in section 6a, what information should the agency provide?

Answer: In describing its review methodology, the agency needs to identify the number of performance plans reviewed, provide an explanation of how the sample size was determined and why those plans were considered a representative sample, what

SL/ST-PAAT Questions and Answers

information the agency looked for while reviewing the performance plans for responses to sections 6-10 of the SL/ST-PAAT, and the results of the review.

If the agency prepared a report of its performance plan review, the agency may attach a copy of that report to the SL/ST-PAAT instead of completing section 6a. When attaching a copy of the report, the agency should include the following in section 6a, "See attached report on the agency's review of SL/ST performance plans."

Q13. What is OPM's standard for the accountability criterion?

Answer: The accountability criterion is met when the agency reports 90 percent or more of supervisory SL/ST employees have performance plans that include a critical element that holds them accountable for the performance management of subordinates, to include aligning subordinate plans with organizational goals and the rigorous appraisal of employees; and the performance plans submitted with the SL/ST-PAAT include that critical element. This criterion does not apply to non-supervisory SL/ST employees. Agencies must indicate which performance plans apply to supervisors.

Alignment

Q14. What does OPM mean by "alignment to organizational goals?"

Answer: SL/ST employee performance plans should align with (i.e., support) organizational goals and targets established in an organization's annual performance plan. Alignment should be clear and transparent so SL/ST employees can see how their performance plans support organizational goal achievement. Merely including a generic statement in performance plans that employees support organizational goals is not adequate for communicating alignment.

Examples of Alignment—SL/ST employee performance plans can show alignment in several ways.

- The appraisal form includes a block in which the supervisor and employee indicate which of the organization's annual performance goals or objectives the results-focused element and its performance standard(s) align with. Be sure that organizational goals are not merely copied into the performance plans or referred to without the element also including the specific results, with metrics, that the SL/ST employee is to accomplish in order to support that goal. In other words, the element should directly relate to the organizational goal and the standard(s) should include clear, credible measures of performance of quality, quantity, timeliness, and/or cost-effectiveness.
- The language in the element explains which organizational goal and objective the element aligns with. For example, "In order for the Bureau to achieve its goal of completing X during this fiscal year, the employee must complete an average of Y each month, with Y meeting the requirements outlined in the agency's Operating Procedures."

SL/ST-PAAT Questions and Answers

- Some agencies have broad strategic goals that can be used in employee performance plans as elements. For example, if the agency has a broad strategic goal of customer satisfaction, the agency could transfer that goal into SL/ST employee performance plans as a critical element, as long as the performance standard(s) for that element holds the employee accountable for a specific result, has measures of performance, and supports any other specific targets that may be found in an organization's annual work plan.

Q15. How should agencies indicate alignment on performance plans?

Answer: There is no prescribed format for indicating alignment on SL/ST employee performance plans. Performance standards must show a clear, transparent link to organizational goals. The supervisor, employee, and any reviewers must be able to identify the originating document and the specific linked goal from what is provided on the appraisal form. Not all agencies spell out the specific alignment to specific organizational goals, but instead prefer to identify the originating goal document and the numbers from that document for the linked goals.

Q16. What is OPM 's standard for the criterion for alignment to organizational goals?

Answer: The alignment criterion is met when the agency reports 90 percent or more of the SL/ST employees have performance plans with clear links to organizational goals and the performance plans submitted by the agency with the SL/ST-PAAT show clear links to organizational goals.

Measurable Results

Q17. What is the measurable results criterion?

Answer: The measurable results criterion is evident when the designated element and performance standard(s) describes measurable (e.g., observable, and/or verifiable) results. Results should have specific targets. If results cannot be measured using numbers (efficiency or accuracy rates, survey results, number completed), a description of what constitutes the Fully Successful level must be included.

Q18. What are measurable results?

Answer: Within the performance appraisal process, measurable results are outcomes or outputs, as appropriate, that are measurable in terms of the quality, quantity, timeliness, and/or cost effectiveness of the result. Measures should be verifiable and observable.

Q19. What are output-based measurable results?

Answer: Outputs are products or services (accomplishments) of employee and work unit activities, and are generally described as nouns. Examples of outputs include files that are orderly, and complete and accurate guidance to customers.

SL/ST-PAAT Questions and Answers

Q20. What are outcome-based measurable results and are they required for SL/ST appraisal system certification?

Answer: Outcomes are the final results of an agency's products and services (and other outside factors that may affect performance).

OPM cannot specify whether outputs or outcomes should be included in SL/ST employee performance plans because it depends on the level of responsibility of the employee. If an employee is responsible for the result of an entire program, it may be appropriate to hold the employee accountable for the outcome. For example, an outcome for a Regional Forest Ranger responsible for planned burns might be “reduced acreage of wildfire burns.” If, however, the employee is responsible for a program that feeds outputs into other programs, it may be more appropriate to hold the employee accountable for the output. For example, an OPM employee responsible for Federal Retirement Programs may be held accountable for the output, “adjudications of 96 percent of disability retirement applications (in which the applicant’s life expectancy is a year or less) are final within 10 days.”

OPM will look for SL/ST employee performance plans with elements and standards that focus on results achieved, as represented by either outcomes, when appropriate, or outputs.

Q21. How can an agency show that at least 60 percent of the summary rating is based on results?

Answer: OPM requires agencies to count measurable results as at least 60 percent of the summary rating. Some ways agencies have met this requirement include—

- Two critical elements with one, Results, weighted 60 percent of the summary rating, and the other, Competencies, weighted 40 percent;
- Three or more critical elements, all equally weighted, with at least 60% of the elements designated as having results-focused measures;
- Three or more critical elements, all equally weighted, with at least 60% of the performance standards in each element having results-focused measures; or
- A derivation formula where the critical element(s) with measurable results drives the summary rating.

Q22. What will OPM credit on the SL/ST-PAAT for the derivation formula?

Answer: Raters will give credit on the SL/ST-PAAT when the agency's appraisal form includes the derivation formula referenced or contained in the system description, and the derivation formula counts measurable results as at least 60 percent of the summary rating or where elements with measurable results clearly drive the summary rating.

SL/ST-PAAT Questions and Answers

Q23. What is OPM's standard for measurable results?

Answer: The measurable results criterion is met when the agency reports 90 percent or more of SL/ST employee performance plans include measurable results that count for at least 60 percent of the summary rating and the performance plans submitted by the agency with the SL/ST-PAAT demonstrate this.

Q24. What is the measurable results criterion?

Answer: The measurable results criterion is evident when the designated element and standard(s) describes measurable (e.g., observable, and/or verifiable) results. Results should have specific targets. If results cannot be measured using numbers (efficiency or accuracy rates, survey results, number completed), a description of what constitutes Fully Successful performance should be included, usually with the timeliness and quality of the results.

Balanced Measures (Customer and Employee Perspectives)

Q25. What are balanced measures?

Answer: Balanced measures are measures or indicators of the solicitation and consideration of employee and/or customer/stakeholder feedback. Supervisory employee performance plans must include both employee and customer perspectives. Non-supervisory employee performance plans must include customer perspective. Agencies must indicate which performance plans apply to supervisors.

Q26. What is OPM's standard for the customer and employee perspective criterion?

Answer: The customer and employee perspective criterion is met when—

- The agency reports 90 percent or more of SL/ST employee performance plans have an element and standard(s) that indicate two-way communication or dialog or collaboration with customers and employees, and consideration of that feedback in the SL/ST employees' actions/decisions; and
- The supervisory SL/ST performance plans submitted by the agency with the SL/ST-PAAT include both customer and employee perspectives, and the non-supervisory SL/ST performance plans include customer perspective. Agencies must indicate which performance plans apply to supervisors.

Consultation

Q27. What does consultation mean in the SL/ST employee appraisal context?

SL/ST-PAAT Questions and Answers

Answer: The consultation requirements for SL/ST employees as outlined in subpart B of 5 CFR 430 means the agency encourages SL/ST employees to participate in the development of their performance plans.

Q28. How will OPM credit consultation in the development of SL/ST performance plans on the SL/ST-PAAT?

Answer: The appraisal system meets the consultation criterion when the system description encourages SL/ST employee involvement and all performance plans include a signatory line on the form that indicates the employee was involved in the development of the performance plan.

Organizational Assessment and Guidelines

Q29. What does OPM mean by organizational assessment?

Answer: One way agency performance is assessed and reported is through requirements of the Government Performance and Results Act. Agencies must report on their performance in achieving specific goals and objectives that they establish at the beginning of the fiscal year. OMB also assesses the performance of agency programs. Agencies should complete some kind of assessment of the year's accomplishments toward strategic goals.

Q30. What type of documentation is expected for the SL/ST-PAAT regarding organizational assessment?

Answer: The agency should provide a thorough description of how it assesses organizational performance, and include PAR information and any other organization assessment data. If the agency has developed a scorecard for components that incorporates all assessments it has conducted of organizational performance, the agency should include a description of the scorecard format, content, and cycle. A sample of the scorecard could be attached.

Q31. What is OPM's standard for communicating organizational performance to SL/ST employees?

Answer: Communication is evidenced by a systematic process for communicating organizational performance to all SL/ST employees. Communication could include an automated system, a scorecard, a memo, staff meetings, off-site strategy meetings, or another method that demonstrates more communication than merely posting the PAR on the agency web site.

Q32. What does OPM mean by guidelines?

Answer: The agency should have a process in place for communicating organizational performance and providing instructions to rating officials and review panel members, as

SL/ST-PAAT Questions and Answers

applicable. The instructions should advise rating officials and review panel members regarding work unit performance and how that should be considered when rating SL/ST employees.

Q33. What is OPM's standard for providing guidelines to SL/ST members, rating and reviewing officials, and review panel members about how organizational performance should be considered when deciding ratings and awards?

Answer: The organization assessment and guidelines criterion is met when the agency provides guidelines to SL/ST employees, rating and reviewing officials, and review panels in writing that includes information about organizational performance, and provides specific guidance on how to take that performance into consideration when determining ratings, pay adjustments, and awards.

Q34. What documentation on guidelines is required for the SL/ST-PAAT?

Answer: Agencies should provide a copy of the written guidelines that were issued to SL/ST employees, rating and reviewing officials, and review panels.

Oversight

Q35. Who should be assigned oversight of the results of ratings, pay adjustments, and rating-based awards under the SL/ST employee performance management system?

Answer: The agency head, or designee, should be responsible for oversight. Within the Office of the Inspector General, the Inspector General or designee should be responsible for the oversight.

Q36. What documentation is required to support the oversight section of the SL/ST-PAAT?

Answer: Agencies should provide the title of the responsible official and evidence that the oversight official has verified the system's evaluation.

Training

Q37. What documentation is required to show the agency provided adequate training to SL/ST employees?

Answer: OPM is looking for ample evidence the agency has conducted adequate training on the program requirements, operations, and results (i.e., the rating distribution and average pay adjustments and average rating-based award amounts). This might be copies of slides, course agenda, or other documentation that indicates what was covered, and should include the number of attendees.

SL/ST-PAAT Questions and Answers

Q38. Once the agency's SL/ST employee pay policy and performance system is established and operating, why is further training required?

Answer: Periodic updates and refresher information is important to alert SL/ST employees of changes in the process and/or procedures of the system, and to remind them of system requirements. Formal classroom training may not be necessary for long-established systems. In those cases, briefings may be more appropriate.

Q39. Why is it necessary to record attendance at training, which is often thought of as a labor-intensive process?

Answer: The purpose of the training is to ensure that SL/ST employees receive the information on the system requirements, operations, and results. Providing the number of attendees is part of the information OPM uses to determine whether the training and/or briefings were adequate. Agencies can develop and deliver excellent training opportunities, but it is inadequate if few attend.

It is common practice in training sessions and briefings to establish a sign-in sheet for attendees. This practice is an effective method and causes minimum burden on the attendees and the administrators of the session. Most on-line training software has the means to record the participants who complete the course and can furnish a list to the administrators.

Q40. What documentation should agencies provide to show rating distribution, the average pay adjustments, and average rating-based award amounts were communicated to SL/ST employees?

Answer: Agencies should provide evidence (for example, slides, a memo, an email) showing the communication of agencywide ratings distribution, average pay adjustments, and average rating-based award amounts to SL/ST employees.

Performance Differentiation

Q41. What documentation is required to report performance differentiation on the SL/ST-PAAT?

Answer: Rating data is provided to OPM through the annual SES and SL/ST rating, pay, and awards data call. In addition to the annual data call information, for certification purposes agencies must provide an explanation of how the rating distribution of SL/ST employees reflects the relationship between the ratings of employees and the performance of the agency/components.

Q42. What is OPM's standard for the ratings distribution from the two most recent appraisal periods?

Answer: The performance differentiation criterion is met when—

SL/ST-PAAT Questions and Answers

- The data from the most recent 2 years indicate the agency has reserved the highest rating level (e.g., Outstanding or equivalent) for identifying its top performers;
- Distributions appear to appropriately reflect organizational performance as determined by the PAR and other organizational performance as reported in the SL/ST-PAAT; and
- The agency provides an adequate description of how the ratings distribution reflects organizational performance.

Q43. What is an adequate description of how the ratings distribution reflects organizational performance?

Answer: The description is adequate when the agency—

- Reports the percent of PAR goals met and exceeded or not met and compares that to the rating distribution, or
- Provides a convincing, detailed justification for the rating distribution in relation to organizational performance.

Pay Differentiation

Q44. What documentation is required to support the agency's pay differentiation?

Answer: Agencies report pay adjustments, performance awards, other cash awards, Presidential Rank awards, and aggregate salaries through the annual data call. In addition, as part of that annual report, agencies will explain any peculiarity in the data. A copy of the agency written pay policy also is provided with the SL/ST-PAAT.

Q45. What peculiarities in the data should the agency explain?

Answer: Agencies should explain unusual circumstances, such as retirements or new hires, or why beginning salaries of one year do not match the ending salaries of the previous year.

Q46. Why is the agency's SL/ST employee pay policy reviewed for certification?

Answer: A copy of the agency's written SL/ST employee pay policy helps OPM assess the pay data by providing a context for the adjustments and awards, especially when peculiarities in the data appear. In addition, OPM reviews the pay policy for compliance with the requirements in 5 CFR 534.503(b).

Q47. What should the agency's analysis of pay adjustments, and awards include?

Answer: The analysis should identify any findings or other information that may be helpful to the organization when providing consequences for performance. Relationships of the mean, median, and mode for different rating levels should be reviewed.

SL/ST-PAAT Questions and Answers

Q48. What does OPM look at to determine whether the agency has made distinctions in pay?

Answer: When determining whether the agency has made distinctions in pay, OPM looks at the agency's total compensation increase given to the SL/ST employees to determine if, on average, the higher-rated SL/ST employees received higher performance-based payments. For agencies with more than 10 SL/ST employees, OPM also looks at the HCAAF Systems, Standards, and Metrics correlation coefficient to see if employee ratings are the primary basis for pay decisions.

Q49. How will pay distinctions be determined for agencies with a small SL/ST population? The correlation coefficient can become problematic for agencies due to population size. Will this point value be reduced or another measure used?

Answer: For agencies with fewer than 10 SL/ST employees, a correlation coefficient may not be appropriate. Instead, OPM will review the mean, median, and mode of performance-based adjustments and rating-based awards, separately and as total compensation, to determine whether higher-rated SL/ST employees were rewarded appropriately.

Q50. What is OPM's standard for the pay differentiation criterion?

Answer: The pay differentiation criterion is met when—

- There are no violations of pay and/or awards limitations in the annual report; and
- The correlation coefficient of the rating and performance compensation (that is pay adjustments and rating-based awards) is 0.5 or more; **OR** the pay and awards data show the agency makes distinctions in pay and the average performance compensation is higher for SL/ST employees rated Outstanding than for those rated Exceeds, and Exceeds is higher than Fully Successful. Note that agencies with a correlation coefficient between 0.5 and 0.699 are awarded 8 points and agencies with a coefficient of 0.7 or higher are awarded the full 10 points.