Conducting Effective Interviews

The employment interview is an effective way of determining who possess characteristics required for the job and therefore, who is right for a job. The following guidelines provide practical information on planning for interviews.

The selecting official alone may conduct interviews of referred best qualified candidates or may request the use of a subject matter expert (SME) or panel to assist in interviews for narrowing the group of best qualified candidates.

INTERVIEWING OPTIONS:

Two types of interview options are available to the selecting official:

(1) Non-numerical ranking – a process of identifying the strongest candidates within the best qualified group based on an overall evaluation and assessment of the strengths of each applicant against the KASOC/competency requirements in the vacancy announcement (i.e., sorting and narrowing the applicants into groups such as strong/strongest with the strongest group referred to the selecting official for final employment consideration). A standardized point scoring system is not used.

(2) Numerical rating and ranking – a process of assigning point scores based on evaluation of applicants against job related criteria to determine the strongest candidates within the best qualified group for referral to the selecting official for consideration.

A structured interview process may or may not be conducted for narrowing the applicant pool. However, when the numerical rating and ranking process (#2 above) is chosen, a qualifications assessment tool outside of the automated hiring system must be developed and consistently applied to evaluate each applicant referred for consideration.

NUMERICAL RATING AND RANKING:

Federal laws and principles that comprise the Merit System require that:

1. Competitive service positions be filled solely on the basis of merit and fitness.
2. Selections be made from the best qualified candidates available.
3. The selecting official be provided a reasonable choice from among highly qualified candidates.
4. Evaluation and selection be free of any discrimination for non-merit reason, such as race, color, religion, sex, national origin, politics, marital status, disability, age, or membership or non-membership in an employee organization.

These merit principles can only be met through the use of valid, job related interview and selection processes. One method available to selecting officials is the use of an SME

panel to assist in the selection process by "numerically rating and ranking" application packages. A numerical ranking process includes assignment of point scores to application packages against job related criteria to determine strongest candidates within the best qualified group for referral to the selecting official for final employment consideration. This process is a supplemental qualifications assessment outside of the automated hiring system that must be linked to the KSAs/competencies established for the initial recruitment process. Numerical ranking provides for a structured process that requires the development of a tool to consistently and fairly evaluate applicant packages.

SUBJECT MATTER EXPERT (SME) PANEL:

SME panels must consist of a minimum of three to a maximum of five members. SMEs are to be selected based on their understanding of the requirements of the position being filled and must be of equivalent or higher grade level of the position to be filled, (i.e., a GS-14 Hydrologist position with a FPL of GS-15 must have GS-14 or higher graded panel members to rate/rank applications). The selecting official of the position to be filled may not serve as a member of the panel. A panel reviews, rates, and ranks the applications. The selecting official, in consultation with the servicing HRO, will identify individuals to serve as panel members. Special care must be taken in the selection of diverse panel members to ensure:

- possession of appropriate subject matter expertise;
- no biases;
- avoidance of friends of friends or the perception thereof;
- no finding of discrimination in the past 5 years;
- retention of confidentiality

Panel members normally consist of current USGS employees; however, there are instances where outside panel representation is needed. While this is an acceptable practice, the selection of these panel members must also follow the above procedures.

ASSESSMENT TOOL AND RATING SCALE:

When a decision is made to use a SME panel process, development of a standardized assessment tool and rating scale is required. The assessment tool must be an extension of the original job analysis which identified the KSA/competency requirements for performing the major tasks of the job. This is the tool used by the panel to measure a candidate's level of skill, ability or knowledge based on their experience which demonstrates possession of the KSAs/competencies. This linkage between the job analysis and assessment tool is critical to ensure fairness and integrity to the panel process. It would be unfair to evaluate the candidates against a set of "unknowns" that weren't represented in the vacancy announcement.

The assessment tool and rating scale must include and describe:

- The KSAs/competencies for evaluation by the SME(s).

- Questions relevant to the KSA/competency being assessed that may be scored based on review of application package alone or in combination with an interview.
- The levels of proficiency for each KSA/competency and a corresponding point score.

The assessment tool must have at least three proficiency levels defined for SME(s) to make their ratings. The defined levels will be assigned points such as 5-expert, 3-satisfactory, 1-acceptable (tasks cannot be below those that must have been performed to meet minimum qualifications for the job). These point value descriptions should contain specific kinds of acceptable experience, training, or other information for each level that are commensurate with the grade level and requirements of the position advertised and pending selection. Task statements should be included that describe tasks applicants might have done which would be indicative of possession of the KSA at each level. NOTE: Length of experience performing the tasks is not a valid indicator of proficiency and must not be used.

The assessment tool should be developed by the selecting official in consultation with the Human Resource Specialist. The selecting official may utilize a SME to assist in the development of the tool but may not participate as a panel member or participate in the interview process. The final assessment tool must be reviewed and approved by the Human Resource Specialist prior to convening the panel.

The following is an example of one KSA/Competency that could be a part of an assessment tool:

KSA/Competency: Supervising/Managing

Questions:

1. Describe your experience in supervising or managing an organization. Include the number of employees, grade levels, responsibilities and budgets. What was the largest number of employees you have supervised?
2. What kind of experience have you had supervising a virtual workforce and how do you overcome the challenges?
3. What methods have you used to build an integrated science team within an organization?

Levels of Proficiency:

Superior (5 points): Applicant has experience supervising and/or managing an organization in their past work experience. The organization is or was greater than 10 people in size. Applicant possesses experience in dealing with complex employee relations issues, working closely with the Human Resources office. Has experience in workforce planning either by developing, providing input or executing a workforce plan. Applicant has supervised employees located in a different physical location (virtual

workforce) and describes methods for dealing with and overcoming those challenges. Has developed a high performing team.

Satisfactory (3 points): Applicant has supervised and/or managed an organization comprised of a maximum of 10 people in size. Applicant possesses experience in dealing with routine employee relations issues, working with higher level manager and/or the Human Resource office. Has practical knowledge of workforce planning. Applicant has frequently dealt with challenges of dealing with a team that is not located in the same physical location. Has participated and/or set up team building exercises.

Acceptable (1 point): Applicant has supervised or managed a small office (3 or 4 staff members), or has been a team leader or project chief and/or has taken training classes which discussed the theories and methods of supervising or managing. . Understands the concept of workforce planning but was not directly involved in developing and/or executing a plan.

REVIEW AND SCORING OF APPLICANT PACKAGES:

Panel Interview:

A subject matter expert panel works as a team. One panel member is typically designated as the chairperson and he/she is responsible for the administrative and logistical arrangements of the interview and for documenting the process. For each candidate interviewed, the panel chairperson should:

-   Briefly describe the job and relevant organizational characteristics.
-   Explain the interview process in a standardized way.
-   Inform the candidate that notes will be taken throughout the interview.
-   Ask if the candidate has any questions.
-   Treat all individuals consistently. Make the process uniform to ensure the same information is collected on each individual and is used in a consistent manner in employment decisions.

Each panel member should take notes from each interview conducted. It is advisable that the notes taken document actual answers given, explanations of how these answers apply to the competency being rated, and why they merit the given rating. Notes will be important for discussions within the panel regarding final ratings.

Each panel member independently rates each candidate interviewed without discussion with other panel members. After panel members complete their independent ratings, they must discuss their individual ratings with each other. While there may be discrepancies in rating scores, there must be no more than a two-point spread difference on any individual KSOC between each panel members' score. It is expected that the panel members will discuss and/or explore the basis for discrepancies, and that an attempt for consensus be reached by the panel. It is plausible that panel members may change their

ratings after further discussions have taken place. In the event the panel members still have more than a two- point spread, each member will document their rationale.

A panel process may reduce the risk of biases in ratings and allows for a diverse range of interviewers, indicating to the candidate that the organization values diversity and fair treatment. The same interviewers should be used for all candidates to ensure consistency in ratings.

Review of Application Materials

The assessment tool and rating scale are used and each application package is evaluated against the proficiency levels based on application material content only. The evaluation, scoring, and panel responsibilities remain the same as outlined above.

FORMAL PRESENTATIONS AS PART OF THE INTERVIEW/SELECTION PROCESS:

Presentations, as part of the interview process, are an acceptable practice. Presentations and the standardized set of questions should aid the selecting official and/or panel members in seeing how a candidate handles questions in front of an audience.

This requirement should be made known to the applicant pool at the advertisement stage. A statement must be included in the vacancy announcement that states "a presentation may be required as part of the interview process." Should the decision be made that a presentation will be required, all candidates will be given the same topic and points to address with adequate time for preparation, and allotted the same amount of time for each of their presentations.

The presentation may be in an open forum format (i.e., all hands meeting) and requires a moderator. The selecting official may choose or serve as the moderator. The moderator will be responsible for ensuring that the audience remains within the guidelines as specified in this package. Webcasts are not permitted. Candidates cannot view the presentations of others. Application packages must not be shared with anyone other than SMEs contributing to the selection process. A presentation format does not afford anyone outside of the selecting official and/or the SME panel the ability to contribute to the final selection decision. If the panel plans to rate and rank this step in the process, an assessment tool must be developed (as explained above). The selecting official may ask the staff prior to the presentation if they have any suggestions for questions. The SME panel and the Human Resources Specialist must review and approve all questions for relevancy to the requirements of the position. All candidates should be asked the same set of questions, given the same opportunities to discuss their qualifications, and afforded the serious attention of all panel members. Ideally, the audience should remain the same for each presenter and should consist of a diverse group of individuals.

Social activities (i.e., building tour) surrounding the candidates' time at the center are acceptable for staff to interact. This opportunity provides for some input as to how the candidates respond in social, as well as professional settings similar to those required by the job. At the discretion of the selecting official, a structured interview with each applicant may be conducted at the conclusion of the presentation/tour, with or without SME panel participation.

Note: For research positions, seminars or presentations on scientific subject-matter is acceptable.

FINAL SELECTION:

The selecting official will make the final selection of the candidate for the position. The selection will be based on his/her personal review of applications, interview results, and recommendations of the SME panel.

INTERVIEW RESULTS:

Interview notes should be taken and must always be job related. Notes relevant to the KSA/competency interview question response must be documented and retained by the selecting official/SME panel members for 2 years. Copies of interview notes are not to be forwarded to the Human Resources Office and are subject to Personal Identifiable Information (PII).

EMPLOYEE OPINION SURVEYS:

If the selecting official chooses to utilize an employee opinion survey, it must be done prior to the development of the vacancy announcement. Results of the survey may be a valuable tool when reviewing and updating the position description.   Thought must be given as to what the selecting official hopes to gain with this survey and decisions must be made prior to recruitment as to how the information gained will be used to bring value to the overall process. An employee opinion survey is not, and should not be, viewed as an assessment tool and its use should be limited to the recruitment strategy.