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Current Personnel Selection Procedures

A psychological test provides a systematic means of drawing inferences about individual differences in behavior. From a sample of behavior in the test situation it can be predicted how individuals will react in other circumstances. To establish the validity of the predictions, the test is tried out on persons of known competence.

Jephthah, wanting to distinguish his followers from the Ephraimites, knew that only his group could pronounce "sh." Having each man say "shibboleth," he effectively selected his men. This was a good test—short, objective, and perfectly valid.

Today our educational system, civilian and military government, and industry use tests by the millions. All are making predictions as to the later success of the individual. Although such forecasts rarely attain Jephthah's accuracy, they can be appreciably better than chance.

Personnel selection is based upon various combinations of tests, ratings of education and experience, appraisals of personality characteristics by interviews, and personal investigations. For other than routine jobs, there is frequently an interview of top-ranking prospects by persons with whom the employee will work. The relative emphasis upon different examining devices should depend upon their availability, practicality, and validity. For thousands of applicants, inclusion of a validated test battery may be wise. With no more than ten competitors, to limit the examination to committee ranking of application forms and brief interviews may be most feasible.

Interviews, as a component of the formal civil service examining procedure, present problems. Even with rigorous standardization, they remain subjective. To achieve comparable standards among boards is almost impossible. For many competitors, the cost is prohibitive. Moreover, ratings on interviews are difficult to defend upon appeal.

For many government positions below grade GS-11, applicants who meet minimum qualifications take tests. They are ranked by the tests alone or by these combined with a rating of education and experience. For positions at GS-11 and above, often the ranks are based only on the latter. In either case, the top three candidates are referred to an operating agency. It makes a selection or,

with cause, may reject all three. For higher-level jobs, many agencies wisely make provision to interview the candidates, if budgets will permit, before making a probationary appointment.

Before World War II, the government's examining procedures were stagnant. The advances in vocational testing to meet war demands are well known, as witness the selection of airplane pilots. Faced with large-scale civilian personnel selection, during the war and immediately thereafter, the U. S. Civil Service Commission made more improvements than in the previous 20 years. Industry, too, has made rapid strides. New personnel consulting firms have developed, staffed largely from military testing programs. Even before the war, larger industrial firms were developing extensive personnel selection programs.

The Honorable James C. Worthy, Assistant Secretary in the Department of Commerce and formerly with Sears, Roebuck and Company, recently made an address on the government career service which has been interpreted in some circles as indicating opposition to tests. Those familiar with the testing program being fostered in the 600-odd retail outlets of Mr. Worthy's company and with his own interest in tests may well believe that he was exaggerating a possible misuse of tests to strengthen a plea for greater administrative latitude in selection of top personnel. Since knowledge and ability are never the sole components of job success, consideration might advisedly be given to some modification of selection methods for higher-level positions. This should not entail decrease in the use of tests for the purposes for which they are suited, for there must be assurance that career employees possess requisite skills and abilities. Nevertheless, individual differences in these characteristics within, say, successive tenths of the group who exceed minimum qualifications probably are not significant as compared with differences in other traits not measured by the tests. Enabling an administrator to choose for an important job from among the top ten per cent of qualified applicants rather than from among the top three might provide an effective supplement to the objective test and the rating of education and experience. Such a plan would add to selection costs, but perhaps not out of proportion to the gains.

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