



The Reform of the European Personnel Selection Office (EPSO) Selection Procedures: *the First Lessons Learned*

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Introduction

On 11 September 2008, EPSO published its 'Roadmap for Implementation' of the Development Programme (hereafter EDP)¹. It set out an ambitious plan of an overhaul of the selection process undertaken by EPSO in only two years. The EDP was indeed largely completed by early 2010. Later that year, the first rounds of open competitions under the new regime were launched.

This article aims to make an initial assessment of the main results of the EDP related to the new design of the personnel selection procedures, numbers and profiles of the candidates sought as well as the language regimes. It also intends to provide a critical assessment of the EDP by highlighting the strategic decisions made by EPSO in the context of a number of policy dilemmas related mostly to time-frames of open competitions, costs and overall efficiency of personnel selection and by enumerating a selection of inconsistencies of the EDP. Finally, the paper proposes a selection of measures for maximisation of benefits of the reform.

Reform of the EPSO selection procedures

Certainly, the reform of the selection procedures was indispensable due to the number of deficiencies. Perhaps the most authoritative criticism of the old regime of EPSO competitions was offered by the European Court of Auditors in its Special Report of September 2009². Its findings were rather harsh. The auditors concluded *e.g.* that the personnel selection took too much time; the emphasis on specific language requirements further discouraged candidates; the competitions produced only two-thirds (on average) of the targeted number of laureates; communication with the candidates was deficient and overall management of information flow and EPSO's database was unreliable and uncomprehensive.

The EPD tackled these shortcomings in a systematic manner. The three major challenges were to cut the length of the selection procedure by half (from approximately two years to maximum one year); to keep the costs at sustainable levels and; above all, to assure high quality laureates. This triangle of challenges at the same time illustrates the dilemma that EPSO's Task Force responsible for designing the EPD faced: how to select the best possible candidates in a relatively short period of time without inflating the budget?

Competency framework

A milestone of the EPD consists of introduction of a competency framework based on the analysis of typical jobs performed by the officials. It comprises the following skills and competencies: analysis and problem solving, communicating, delivering quality and results, learning and development, prioritising and organising, resilience and working with others. A further competency specific to the administrator positions is leadership. The competency framework constitutes a basis for reforming of the selection methods. In theory, each candidate should be assessed with reference to each and every competency and not by a direct comparison to performance of other candidates. The outcome was the move from a knowledge to a competency-based assessment of candidates. This shift resulted in cancellation of the infamous 'EU knowledge test' at the first, pre-selection stage. The second stage of the competition has also been affected by this change. Under the past regime, the admission stage was divided into two exams, one written and the other oral (with an interval of approximately two months between the two).



The EPD, inspired by common best practices observed not only in the private sector but also in some national public administrations decided to integrate the admission phase into a one-day long Assessment Centre (AC). This selection method offers the employer a possibility to observe and grade candidates in situations typical to the work environment. EPSO-style AC is composed of four components: group exercise, case study, oral presentation and structured interview. Each of the exercises assesses four selected competencies and each competency is tested in two exercises. At the same time, it is worth noting that the case study is the only part of the whole selection process where the application of knowledge in a given field is assessed. The choice of an integrated AC replacing a two-stage admission phase *prima facie* allows reaching certain time-efficiency gains. It must be borne in mind however, that a whole day long AC is also quite time-consuming. Given that the number of professionalised EPSO assessors is limited, the ambitious time-frame of open competitions determines *de facto* the number of candidates who may be invited to the AC.



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The first competition launched under the new regime

Before analysing the design of the reform it is worth taking notice of the very first open competition which has completed its cycle under the new rules. The notice of competition for AD5 general profiles³ was published in mid-March 2010 and the reserve list of successful candidates in February 2011. Therefore, it can serve as an interesting case-study to highlight the main features of the new style of selection process run by EPSO. The said competition offered in total 323 positions dispatched over five general profiles. In total, 51,639 candidates applied. The most 'generalist' profile, that of European Public Administration, attracted almost 30,000 candidates, while 'Audit' profile reached less than 3,000. It must be noted however that over 14,000 candidates dropped from the competition before its first stage as 37,329 finally sat the CBT⁴.

After reform, the CBT is composed of the verbal and numerical reasoning tests (used previously as well) and novel abstract reasoning and situational judgement tests. The three 'reasoning tests' were said to assess candidates' 'general aptitudes and competencies' and were eliminatory. By contrast, the situational judgement test was graded, but its results were not eliminative. Nevertheless, its results were intended to be used during a later stage of the selection procedure during the structured interview. In order to pass the test a candidate must score 50% of available points. In practice, only the top-tier candidates who mark correctly approximately 90% of questions are invited to the AC. In fact, 992 candidates were invited to the AC⁵. Such figure is a result of a simple yet informal rule: the number of the invitees should equal the number of positions available multiplied by three. In EPSO's opinion this equation strikes a balance between a sufficient pool of candidates to choose from, the tight time-frame and budgetary constraints.

The final result of the whole process is a selection of 308 successful candidates who are now placed on the reserved list and ready to be recruited by the EU institutions. Once more, the EPSO has not achieved to draw the planned number of laureates, but the result of over 95% is much better than the past average success rate indicated by the Court of Auditors.

A number of lessons can be drawn from the first year of the application by EPSO of the modernised selection processes. The last year competition for the AD5 profiles attracted a huge number of candidates. A number of arguments can be put forward to explain this.

This competition was opened for citizens of all Member States of the EU, the first after a long period when a special attention was given to the nationals of the 'EU 12'. Moreover, the new style of competitions (shorter; no EU knowledge test) proves to be appealing especially given the EPSO's marketing and PR campaign (including the revamped website, new logo, social networks accounts). Of course EPSO seeks to attract the largest possible base in their quest for talent. At the same time, the use of legitimate dissuasive measures, such as a self-assessment exercise that is designed to discourage poor candidates, was of limited effectiveness. This suggests that similar but more effective measures should be considered for the future.

The first lessons learned

Another observation related to the number of candidates focuses on proportions between candidates assessed by the CBT and at the AC. According to the Court of Auditors report, competitions run before the reform, on average, of the candidates sitting the pre-selection tests, 28% progressed to the subsequent written test; 50% of those sitting the written tests proceeded to the oral test. Thus, over one-fourth of candidates used to be subject of initial substantive assessment before (during the written test) while only 2.66% were given a chance to show their skills and competencies last year at the AC.

At this stage certain concerns regarding the consistency of the approach undertaken by EPSO need to be addressed. In fact, the eliminatory parts of the CBT (the reasoning tests) of the 2010 competition were described as measuring 'general aptitudes and competencies'. Thus, the CBT was not designed to measure candidates competencies enumerated in the competency framework. It is only the AC stage which is designed to address the said foundation of the EDP. One may legitimately assume that the CBT, while selecting intelligent, reasoned individuals, may allow to proceed to the AC candidates with horrible communications skills and poor active knowledge of a foreign language (both in writing and orally), unable to work in teams or to solve more complex cases by delivering high quality output. While this risk should be considered real, it is hoped that it does not materialised too often. One more inconsistency in the design of the EDP is the related to case study testing (the ability to apply knowledge in a given field). While this skill should certainly be given its weight in the selection process, it does not feature in the EPSO's competency framework.

The continuation of the reform of EPSO's selection procedures brings one novelty in this respect. From 2011 onwards, the situational judgment test becomes eliminatory along with the reasoning tests⁶. This move could be praised as leading to a more widespread use of the competency framework provided that it is made clear what competencies listed in the framework are assessed by this test. Unfortunately, while a non-binding communication from EPSO 'New admission tests'⁷ published in early 2010 indicated

five specific competencies, the Notice of Open Competitions published on 16 March 2011 still refers to 'general aptitudes and competencies'. Thus, it seems, there remains uncertainty about which competences shall be tested by the situational judgment test.

A separate bundle of concerns relates to the linguistic framework of the open competitions. The 2010 AD5 competition followed an old pattern that candidate must have a thorough knowledge of any

official language of the EU and have, as its second language, satisfactory knowledge of one of the three working languages: English, French or German (but other than the first language). The selection process was run almost exclusively in this second language. While this solution assured that candidates would be able to work in the EU institutions it has been criticised on at least two main grounds. First, that the tests are discriminatory as they are not available in all official languages of the EU. Second, that in some instances, the language rules could favor the native speakers of the working languages of the EU or, in other cases that they may render them ineligible. For instance, a German national who considers they have a thorough knowledge of English may decide to choose it as their main language; German being the second one. In this case, the German national would have an advantage of taking the tests and the AC in their mother tongue. However, an English national who has a satisfactory knowledge of Spanish would not be eligible in the first place even if ultimately, they could work in their mother tongue while still bringing

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the asset of multilingualism. It must be noted that from 2011, open competitions will run according to modernised language rules: the choice of languages will be similar; however, the reasoning tests will be available in all 23 official languages of the EU. Nevertheless, the situational judgment test and the AC will still run in the candidates second (EU working) language. This novelty has already sparked criticism from some candidates, as they are concerned about the quality of the translation, in particular, of the verbal reasoning tests.

Additional comment on the last year's competition for general profiles relates to the fact that only AD5 grade positions were offered. In fact, the statistics show that the average age of a candidate was 32.6 years. Moreover, 30,000 candidates were over 30 years old and thus, most likely having considerable professional experience. The remedy to tackle this deficiency is to open competitions for general profiles on various levels (provided that they are indeed required) and more extensive use of specialised competitions. It seems that the EPSO has already identified this issue as the open competition of March 2011 is opened not only to AD5 grades but also AD7 levels (for candidates with at least six years of relevant professional experience).

Final considerations relate to the design and results of the EDP in general. While the effort of EPSO to modernise its selection procedures and make them more efficient shall be applauded a number of concerns remain disregarded. First, even though the revamped EPSO website gives an impression of being more legible and transparent than before, it does not offer a full picture of 'EU careers'. While the EDP tackled the methods for selection of officials it did not address the issue of contract agents. The selection rules regarding the latter, therefore, do not benefit from the efforts of the EDP. In addition, some candidates may be confused about the status and selection methods of the temporary agents. What is more, the EPSO is responsible for personnel selection for major institutions, thus it does not run competitions for positions in numerous agencies, offices and bodies of the EU. Even positions opened by one of the very institutions of the EU – the European Central Bank – are not managed by EPSO. It seems that even if EPSO is not competent to conduct personnel selection for the above mentioned entities, it should become a gateway to the 'EU jobs' and serve as a point of single contact to provide information to all interested candidates about the impressive number of various career opportunities the EU institutions, agencies, offices and bodies offer.

Conclusion

It is argued that the overall direction of modernising the open competition is positive as it is based on duly construed competency framework and aims at reducing the length of the procedure. The first competition which was completed in February 2011 proves the new regime is workable. At the same time, a number of deficiencies have been highlighted. Computer based pre-selection eliminated over 97% of candidates even though it was not directly based on the competency framework, leaving only a small fraction of candidates subject to substantive assessment. The language rules are still in the process of modernisation. Other means to reap the full benefits of the reform, such as the opening up of more specialised competitions as well as general profiles competitions for varied grades, could lead to further improvements.

Notes

- ¹ EPSO, Task Force EPSO Development Programme, *Roadmap for Implementation*, EPSO/TF/2008/public, Brussels, 11 September 2008.
- ² European Court of Auditors, Special Report No 9, 2009, *The Efficiency and Effectiveness of the Personnel Selection Activities Carried out by the European Personnel Selection Office*.
- ³ AD5 is a grade for newly graduates or candidates with little professional experience. 'General profiles' refers to profiles such as: European Public Administration, Law, Economics, Audit etc.
- ⁴ Most figures related to the candidates taking part in the 2010 AD5 competition were disclosed in the press release IP/11/129, *Recruitment: Results published for first EPSO competitions*, Brussels 4 February 2011.
- ⁵ Source: author's own communication with EPSO in his capacity of a candidate.
- ⁶ EPSO, Notice of Open Competitions EPSO/AD/206/11 (AD 5) and EPSO/AD/207/11 (AD 7), OJEU 2011/C 82 A/01 of 16 March 2011, p. 4.
- ⁷ EPSO communication, *New admission test*, of 29 January 2010 available at http://europa.eu/epso/discover/news/news15_en.htm; accessed on 2 May 2011.