



DATE: September 20, 1999

TO: ALL STATE AGENCIES AND EMPLOYEE ORGANIZATIONS

SUBJECT: Concerns Regarding the Use of Supplemental Applications

Article VII of the California Constitution requires that in the civil service permanent appointments and promotions be made under a general system based on merit ascertained by competitive examination. Government Code Section 18930 requires that examinations for the establishment of eligible lists be competitive and of such character as to fairly test the qualifications, fitness and ability of candidates to perform the duties of the classification to which they seek appointment.

A focus of State Personnel Board concern has been the State's increased reliance on the use of supplemental applications as a relatively "quick, easy and inexpensive" way of meeting its selection needs. The extensive proliferation in the use of supplemental applications as the sole selection device in many examinations has led to questioning whether such examinations are fairly and accurately assessing competitor's qualifications and whether they are accurate predictors of success in the job. Consequently, questions arise as to whether the resultant appointments and promotions are truly based on merit.

Supplemental applications were originally intended to be used and are most appropriately used as a non-weighted screening device for large candidate groups. In these situations, supplemental applications are most valid and reliable when based on a thorough job analysis and when they are used to assess the quantitative aspects of a competitor's experience, including the amount of relevant training, education and work experience a competitor has had in relation to the requirements of the classification.

Supplemental applications are far less valid and reliable in assessing the qualitative aspects of a competitor's experience, particularly as the experience applies to the knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) required for successful performance in a classification.

Among the specific concerns which have been identified with supplemental applications are that they:

- (1) Focus on length of experience and training as opposed to the more important depth and breadth of a competitor's training and experience.
- (2) Lend themselves to the potential for exaggeration and misrepresentation of a competitor's qualifications.
- (3) Result in rankings that are low in validity and, consequently, are poor predictors of job success.
- (4) Unless carefully constructed, produce ambiguous, unreliable, inconsistent and inaccurate results.

There are a wide variety of techniques that can be used to provide a more thorough and valid assessment of the KSAs needed to perform successfully in the target job. Such techniques include structured interviews, written tests, low-fidelity simulations, computer-based tests, in-basket exercises, work sample tests, and performance tests. The occupation for which the test will be given, the KSAs which need to be assessed in determining the potential for success in a job, the size of the candidate group, the potential for adverse impact, and exam validity and reliability are all factors to be considered in determining the most appropriate selection technique.

If, after considering the aforementioned factors, it is determined that a supplemental application is an appropriate selection technique, care should be taken to design an instrument which will result in optimal validity and reliability. There are several different supplemental application models that can be used. The model known as the *behavioral consistency model* provides the best measure of the candidates' prior training and experience. The *behavioral consistency model* requires candidates to provide narrative responses to specific questions regarding their background. Raters using a detailed scoring guide evaluate the responses. This technique is far superior to the more common self-rating point method in which candidates rate themselves in terms of the KSAs required to perform particular job-related tasks. While the use of the self-rating point method is generally discouraged because of the aforementioned concerns, such a technique can be strengthened by using very detailed and specific items, as well as a rating scale which adequately captures differences in candidate qualifications. It is important that the information requested in any supplemental application be based on the results of a thorough job analysis.

Staff in our Test Validation and Construction (TV &C) Unit can provide guidance and consultation as to whether the circumstances associated with a particular examination warrant the use of a supplemental application and if so, can offer assistance in ensuring that the instrument used will result in a valid and reliable predictor of job success. They can also provide additional information regarding more valid and reliable selection techniques such as those identified above. If you have technical questions regarding the use of supplemental applications or would like information regarding valid and appropriate alternatives to the use of supplemental applications, you are encouraged to contact Mike Willihnganz, Manager, Test Validation and Construction Unit, at (916) 654-1672 CALNET 8-464-1672 or TDD (916) 654-6336.

The State Personnel Board will conduct Quality Assurance reviews of departmental selection programs. In preparation for these reviews, we plan to survey departments in order to have a better understanding of current practices and potential problem areas, as well as the needs and concerns of departments.

Critical to these reviews will be the need to determine whether supplemental applications are being used in an appropriate manner, consistent with the aforementioned concerns and considerations. Accordingly, we will be reviewing the use of supplemental applications, their assigned weight in an examination, whether a supplemental application is based on a thorough job analysis, and the content of the supplemental applications. Supplemental applications used in examinations administered by SPB will be included in this review.

If you have any questions regarding policy-related issues involving the use of supplemental applications or would like additional information regarding the proposed Quality Assurance reviews, you should contact Martha Esmael, Manager, Quality Assurance Unit, at (916) 654-5815, CALNET 8-464-5815, or TDD (916) 653-1498.

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