MERIT SELECTION STRATEGIES FOR SENIOR MANAGEMENT POSITIONS

EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

The problem faced by the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority (QFRA) has been that the current Public Sector selection strategies for senior management positions do not “necessarily produce merit-selected appointments” (Staib, 1996, p. 232)

The purpose of this applied research project is to determine if such criticism is valid and if so to identify proven and suitable methodologies which when adopted will result in the implementation of a process that is transparent credible, simplistic and equitable.

The research methodology used was an evaluative approach. The specific research questions examined in order to arrive at a valid decision for future strategies were:

1. What problems are associated with the traditional Public Sector approach?
2. What needs to be measured when selecting for senior management positions?
3. How can the future performance of individuals be reliably predicted?

The procedures developed for this project were aimed at overcoming these issues. This was achieved by evaluating the problems associated with the type of selection strategies currently in use, examining the qualities needed of future senior management and identifying means of reliably predicting a candidate's future performance in such a position.

The research found that the current QFRA system of written application, interview and referee check is not a process regarded as reliable and objective by a number of authors. Also common was the view that the issue of leadership competencies versus a more traditional managerial skill is an important consideration for future managers.

This research recommends the adoption of an assessment/development center approach to enhance selection strategies and personal and professional development of staff and identifies the considerable organizational gains achievable by adopting this methodology.
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INTRODUCTION

The problem faced by the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority is that the current Public Sector selection strategies for senior management positions do not “necessarily produce merit-selected appointments” (Staib, 1996, p. 232)

The purpose of this applied research project is to determine if such criticism is valid and if so to identify proven and suitable methodologies which when adopted will result in the implementation of a process that is transparent, credible, simplistic and equitable. Most of all, it must truly assess the merits of individuals in terms of their capability to perform in the job.

The research methodology used was an evaluative approach. The specific research questions examined in order to arrive at a valid decision for future strategies were:

1. What problems are associated with the traditional Public Sector approach?
2. What needs to be measured when selecting for senior management positions?
3. How can the future performance of individuals be reliably predicted?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

In 1988 the Government of the day commissioned an independent consultant to examine the function of the eighty-one Fire Brigade Boards which managed the ‘State Fire Services’. The recommendation made was that these boards be disbanded and replaced with one agency under the control of government. Thus the Queensland Fire Service, as an agency of the Bureau of Emergency Services was formed in 1990. Since this time, another three separate reviews have been conducted by external agents, all occurring at times of Political sensitivity and each resulting in major changes to description of core business functions, organizational structure and resource allocations. Two of these have resulted in spills of middle management.
The third of these reviews, the Staib review of 1996 resulted in the formation of a statutory body, the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority (QFRA).

The Staib (1996) review made a number of references to the “1950s paramilitary style leadership and management culture” (p. 3), and associated problems of the organization such as the lack of community input. Particularly highlighted was the lack of exposure to the ethics, trends and values of the business community as well as changing social trends of the general community. Recognising that “the directive and controlling leadership style …..is outmoded and inappropriate” (p. 201) there was a need to change the culture of the organization, to promote honesty, integrity and trust and to develop an ethos which encourages free communication, innovation and support.

In reviewing the Queensland Fire Service (QFS), Staib (1996) found that recruitment and selection procedures were:

cumbersome, time consuming, extremely bureaucratic and not easily managed by operational personnel. The process does not necessarily produce merit-selected appointments either. In many instances as the process has been implemented, excessive reliance on process detail has produced outcomes not intended by the original policy development team. (p. 232)

Whilst Staib’s recommendation was for a simplified procedure, the resultant modified process used for the appointment of all Senior Officers resulting from a spill of positions in 1997 was arguably even more focussed on procedural detail.

This was evidenced in part when the appointment of ten Area Directors was overturned at review based on departure from the process by the selection panel. The fact that the subsequent
process resulted in nine of the original ten proposed appointees being returned and the tenth being found meritorious and appointed shortly thereafter added to this argument.

The office of the Public Service (1997) in Queensland has defined a Workforce Management Strategy for the Queensland Public Service. Within the document, it is highlighted that “the quality of the workforce is a prime determinant of the capacity of an organization to deliver the results required of it” (p. 10). Further, that “having the right people in the right place at the right time is fundamental to the operation of any successful undertaking” (p. 10).

Whilst the principles of obtaining the best person for the job must always be defended, anecdotal evidence suggests that current processes are only achieving the person best at fulfilling the needs of a predictable process. Since October 1997 this author has chaired or been a member of selection panels for a number of senior management positions as well as being involved in three review hearings. From these experiences, it has become more obvious that the focus of panels is being directed towards documentation of the process rather than an assurance of selecting the best applicant. This has resulted in the use of an inordinate amount of resources in conducting selection tests and a very narrow view of relative merit. Applicants can become well versed in the process, show and tell the panel what they want to hear and make it virtually impossible for the panel to defend not recommending them or at least finding them meritorious.

In describing the Australian Public service process, Townsend (1996) found the process so laborious that it had taken on a life of its own and on selection criteria discusses the example of an applicant “working the panel with an erudite discussion of ability” (p. 4) matched with selection criteria.

If the QFRA is to truly position itself as being a world’s best practice organization, then it must find a selection process which determines the true merits of individuals against our
organization’s needs and not be led by practices which are learnable by applicants. There are methods, which are more reliable and that consider an applicant’s full range of skills, abilities, aptitudes, qualifications, knowledge experience and potential. The question of the economical viability of these methods however is one that also has to be evaluated in the selection of premium personnel.

A major impacting policy area is that of training and our current strategies for developing future leaders of the organization. Analysis within this paper will include critical discussion of the current competency based training system (CBT) and its relationship to the preparation of employees seeking career progression, in particular, if basic competencies are a valid tool for determining merit.

The relevance of this is highlighted by the fact that the present merit selection process (for senior officers) does not take into consideration the existence or otherwise of current competencies, as specified within the Australian Fire Competencies, of applicants. Nor, as an organization is there currently a process that can be relied upon by individuals to accurately identify shortfalls in their professional profile and identify a suitable development plan. Whilst the direct relevance of CBT data in merit processes is arguable, there is certainly a need to consider the relationship between the two issues.

The organizational benefits of the project are both short and long term. The ultimate benefit is that having the most meritorious people in position, the organization will be best place to achieve corporate goals. In the shorter term, the issue of merit promotion is one that is viewed by many staff as ineffectual, mal-administered and inequitable, there is therefore the opportunity to have significant impact on staff morale by acknowledging their views and addressing their
concerns. Improved efficiencies in these processes will also provide returns to the organization in the form of quite obvious and tangible resource savings.

The Foreword of the course manual for the Executive Development component of the Executive Fire Officer Program discusses executive traits for future fire service executives. Issues discussed include an acceptance of cultural diversity, the ability to inspire trust and to be able to predict future challenges rather than just react, stating “the Executive Fire Officer of tomorrow will be the person who knows himself/herself, and acts accordingly” (p. iii). The challenge facing the fire services’ is to be able to recognize that person and have a reliable means of ensuring they are selected to fulfill these positions. This issue was discussed with course members and instructors in terms of current strategies in use within the USA. The many and at times considerable political and cultural differences mean that whilst some aspects had merit there is a need for this issue to be examined in greater depth for application in the Queensland environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research Question 1. What problems are associated with the traditional Public Sector approach?

In reviewing contemporary thinking on the subject of merit selection it is useful to firstly consider the aim of the process itself and what is meant by the term merit from both a legislative and practical viewpoint.

The Public Service Act Review Group (1994) describe merit as embodying two ideas, firstly that the person being selected for a position is competent to do it and secondly that where there are a number of applicants that the one selected is best able to do the job. Their
recommendation regarding a definition of merit stated the need to consider certain requirements, these included:

- Skills and abilities
- Qualifications,
- Achievement of recognised competencies
- Training,
- Experience,
- Standard of work performance, and
- Potential for development.

These principles are commonly encapsulated within organizations’ definitions of merit and have regard for a range of legislative issues such as equal employment opportunity and anti-discrimination principles, this is echoed by the definition applied by the Department of Emergency Services. Rightly so, this place emphasis on the rights of the individual applicant.

Jansen and de Jongh (1997) describe the aim of selection processes as a prediction of how someone will function in a new position. This view places emphasis on the corporate benefits and rights of selection by inferring the need to obtain the person whom will best perform in a particular role to ensure corporate performance

Whilst thinking on the use and ideology of merit selection remains fairly constant there does exist an evolving change in approaches on how merit should be determined. Burton (1996) refers to a relationship between a person’s job related qualities and those required to perform in a particular position, and notes that identifying and assessing these are impossible to do without subjective views being applied. Hawke (1996) supports this view, in discussing the effect workplace culture has on selections he suggests that it dominates assessment and can result in
institutionalization of indirect discrimination. On standard selection criteria he claims that, “they are very crude tools, the only useful purpose of which is to provide a formula by which a favoured or preferred applicant can be described as the most suitable” (p. 3). Such tools form an integral part of present QFRA techniques and a range of staff within the organization commonly holds the above views.

The most commonly identifiable approach to determining the relative merit of applicants is that of utilizing a written application, referee checks and a performance interview. Whilst fairly common for such processes to include demonstrations of actual ability, particularly in technical or task oriented positions, Harrison (1995) points out that when recruiting senior managers, “you don’t ask candidates to demonstrate what they can do, you ask them to talk about what they can do” (p. 34). A common basis for decision making in these circumstances is the applicant’s previous performance, Jansen and de Jongh (1997) suggest that “this can only be effective if the new job does not differ too much from the previous one, otherwise prediction of future performance can be precarious” (p. 6). Thus when considering people for promotion to senior management, a position which is likely to differ significantly from their previous, their use as sole means must be questioned.

In discussing various selection tools, Saville and Holdsworth (1994) note that “the evidence does not justify the predominance of the interview as an assessment tool” (p. 5/7). Of the nine assessment methodologies subject to Smith’s (1988) meta-analysis, interviews and resume culling recorded the lowest validity rating of .19 and .01 respectively. This is graphically illustrated by the following illustration.
A theme commonly identified in readings is that a system solely dependant on written applications, interviews and referee checks is “less than reliable and objective” (QPS, 1998, p. 4) and that the challenge is to “test the candidate as a whole person – covering all their qualities” (Dukes, 1988 p. 65). Davis (1996) agrees, stating that the job interview “is thought to suffer from both a lack of reliability and validity” (p. 191).

Clark (1994) describes the interview as consistently unreliable and discusses the application of judgement by the interviewer as a key in the outcome, highlighting the halo effect as a major problem. Also discussed is the effect the interviewer can have on the performance of the applicant through tone of voice, body language and general attitude. So whilst ideally
treating every applicant the same, interviewers can either unconsciously or deliberately influence a performance.

Recognising this ability of interviewers to have such a bearing on the proceedings and undoubtedly to ensure a panel is focused on correct process the appeal or review has become predominant in contemporary selection processes.

Describing appeals systems, the then Queensland Public Sector Management Commission (1990) stated that, “the deterrent effect of the system is more important than the actual appeals. The mere existence of the system helps deter inappropriate promotions…” (p. 4). This has contributed to the increasingly common problem of laborious processes centered on compliance, described by Townsend (1996) as “so time consuming that it detracts from the more important task of defining the workplace and the customised requirements of the job” (p. 4)

Research Question 2. What needs to be measured when selecting for senior management positions?

To address the challenges facing the QFRA and other public sector organizations and to place these organizations in positions of future success will require people with distinctive and particular knowledge, skills and attributes or competencies (Dickensen, 1993). A commonly accepted concept of the term ‘Competency’, is that which the National Training Board (1992) discusses in terms of “…what is expected of an employee…” (p. 29) and which encompasses, knowledge, skill and their application.

Curtain (1993) highlights the key competencies required are those of leadership, stating that “public sector managers at all levels need to be able to display leadership values” (p. 38). The issue of leadership competencies versus a more traditional managerial skill set is argued by Curtain in terms of good management being related to order and predictability whilst leadership
through inspiration, motivation and establishment of common values of staff is able to produce change, “often to a dramatic degree” (p. 38).

Within Queensland, the office of the Public Sector (1997) have recognised that the “public service of the future will have a strong performance culture which will revolve around valuing the contribution of staff as individuals and team members, client service, best practice and the achievement of organizational goals. Leadership skills……will be at a premium” (p. 3). The model outlined for workforce management relies heavily on the implementation of this “Workforce Leadership” principle, defined as “mobilizing people to deal with current and future challenges.” (p. 9) Four key elements are identified for implementation of the plan together with actions and outcomes. The ability to apply these elements must then form the basis of leadership competencies required for the organization.

These elements are:

- Organizational leadership,
- Leadership of people as individuals and teams,
- Management of change, and
- Accountability for performance.

As part of the plan, another three principles are identified; all of which rely on leadership skills,

- Workforce Capability: Having the right people in place at the right time.
- Workforce performance: Creating a performance culture centered on continuous improvement and best practice. and
- Organizational Climate: Creating a positive work environment where people feel valued and respected.
Some of the traits required of these leaders are identifiable in traditional theories, such as that espoused by Bennis & Nanus (1985), in that, "One aspect of an effective leader is the ability to manage and communicate meaning; to ensure that those leading can capture the imagination of others and align these behind the organization goals and priorities" (p. 163). Also identifiable are those traits discussed by George and Cole (1992) as those of a transformational leader including the ability to think strategically, conceptualise and set visions and missions. They also suggest that they are energetic, charismatic people with excellent communication skills, able to inspire people.

The discussion on the use of technical competence in promotional activities makes it necessary to consider the impact of and on competency based training programs and their reliability as predictors for relative merit.

The Commonwealth Department of Finance (1994) defines the goal of Human Resource Management as focusing “on individual performance thus helping people achieve their agency’s or their program’s objectives and continuously improve their agency’s performance” (p. 45). CBT provides the tools to achieve this, by identifying the tasks to be completed, the necessary skill and knowledge needed by individuals to be successful and the means of assessing this success against industry requirements or standards.

The progressive change in mix of skills required as people progress within an organization is well documented by authors such as George and Cole (1992) and Jansen and de Jongh (1997). Whilst CBT lends itself well to the recognition of technical related skills, the measurement of managerial skills can be argued to be somewhat more subjective, particularly when done for the specific purpose of a merit selection process. Townsend (1996) and Hawke
(1996) highlight this in their discussion of generic selection criteria in regard Senior Executive Service (SES) appointments within the Australian Public Service (APS).

It can be argued that whilst CBT provides an accurate account of skill levels, it does not offer information on an individual’s performance, other than performance in obtaining those skills. Stevenson (1994) argues the limitation of CBT, especially the fact that it does not take into account factors such as attitude. Stating that “where values additional to the satisfaction of industry’s need for skilled workers apply, or where personal construction of knowledge by the individual is warranted, the limitations of the system become more apparent” (p. 7)

Thus for organizations, such as the QFRA, CBT is an excellent tool when considering the progression and promotion of staff at levels where progression is linked to a pay for skills award and there is no selection process involved. With the introduction of CBT, has come the argument that it facilitates the selection of suitably meritorious people to perform tasks that will be required of them. Whilst CBT outcomes do indicate particular skills held by personnel, it falls short of being sufficient to be the sole basis to judge merit as it does not indicate potential for further development or performance.

The Australian Fire Competencies are described as reflecting the skills, knowledge and application required to perform competently on the job, what is not discussed is the issue described by various authors (Dulewicz 1989 and Woodruffe 1992) as the behavioural patterns which should be specific, observable and verifiable.

Kouzes and Posner (1993) conclude that “promotion decisions made solely on the basis of technical competence run the risk of undermining commitment to shared values” (p. 139)

Examination of discussions on the role of organizational culture and an individual’s attitude or ‘fit’ in an organization reveal a number of often opposing viewpoints. Townsend
(1996) holds that workplace culture (future) needs to be central to staff selection and that “welding culture and merit can result in significant change”. Kouzes and Posner (1993) state unequivocally that “an organization’s recruitment and hiring programs are critical for reinforcing and sustaining common values” (p. 136), and stress the importance of “finding people who fit the company rather than a specific job” (p. 136). This approach is in contrast to the principles of merit selection if we consider contemporary practice of trying to be more specific in identifying role specific criterion.

Glaze (1989) reinforces this through his description of the Cadbury Schweppes experience, stating that “specialist or professional expertise may still be an important requirement in many jobs, but behavioural factors are increasingly at the heart of management excellence” (p. 44).

Both Burton (1996) and Hawke (1996) discuss the influence of existing cultures on the selection of staff and the adverse effect that may have, particularly the perpetuation of that culture. At face value this may lead to an even more clinical approach to merit determination. However, it must be recognised that every organization will be subject to a set of values or culture and if that culture is not the desired one then the identification of desired attitudes or behaviours in individuals should be actively considered in appointments.

Given the factors identified with the more traditional approach to selection, the importance of considering desired organizational culture and the issues of specific competencies, it is necessary to explore means of obtaining a more holistic view of an individual’s merit.

**Research Question 3. How can the future performance of individuals be reliably predicted?**

As highlighted by Rohl (1998), “our worth to our organizations is no longer our experience or our qualifications, but rather, the value we add to our organizations. Unless we are
adding value we are really only treading water.” The importance of this viewpoint on the selection of staff is that unless as employers we are able to select staff capable of adding value, we cannot progress our organizations. This emphasises the need for the continued development of valid, reliable and appropriate selection methodologies.

On this issue Rohl describes the successulness of assessment/ development center methodology to “assess members potential for higher office because they have a much higher predictive capacity than traditional selection methodologies”, discussing a high validity rate with regard the prediction of future performance standards.

Dukes (1988) describes the objective as to “assess the candidate as a whole person- covering all his qualities- unlike simpler procedures which may rely, for example, on a trade test plus a simple interview” (p. 65).

This leads to the use of job specific simulations to assess certain requirements in an arguably more objective fashion, however as Dukes (1988) discusses, once any test is subject to interpretation by an assessor, there must be a degree of subjectivity.

The need to develop this profile of an individuals overall capability has been the subject of various research and methodology for the most part of this century. At this point most readings dealing with alternative test methods, particularly those other than psychological or psychometric tend to combine discussion with advantages and disadvantages of assessment centers.

Ulschak (1983) describes a wide range of assessment instruments and stresses the need to ensure that these are specifically related to the particular job. Those discussed include in-basket exercises, written exercises, group discussions, role-plays and interviews. He claims that “it provides a depth and precision of behavioural observations about individuals which we cannot
obtain by any other common assessment methods” (p. 172). The other major advantage highlighted by Ulschak is that the results of the process “are easily translated into training needs” (p. 173).

Whilst Dukes (1988) agrees with this he recognises the complex nature of management and the artificiality of the tests, particularly in the eyes of the candidates and the fact that how people perform under test may not always be representative of future performance. Notwithstanding this, he still argues that such tests are reliable predictors of future management success and that they can “produce better results than any other approach” (p. 71).

Davis (1996) describes a similar range of test mechanisms that may be used in similar determinations as well as potential for teamwork, motivation and cultural compatibility.

The Queensland Police Service (1998), having recently introduced the concept of assessment centers for promotion to the rank of Inspector describe the process as “obtaining samples of behaviour which are relevant to success in the job for which the candidate is being considered” (p. 6). The Queensland Police Commissioner has described it as a guarantee of equity in the promotion process.

Although Beck (1983) recognises that assessment centers are not a physical place but a process, many discussions see the sorts of tests being conducted centrally, away from the workplace by a number of relatively constant assessors. With the introduction of workplace assessor courses and qualifications it may now be possible to conduct much of traditional assessment center activities in a more decentralised and cost-effective manner. Against the use of such centers the most common argument is that of cost effectiveness, Ulschak stressing that if the need is infrequent then the costs are likely to far outweigh the benefits. Duke
points out however the significant consideration that there are also large costs associated with recruiting or promoting the wrong people.

Discussions with other Fire Services reveal systems which although vary slightly have significantly similar components to that of QFRA. Internationally, Central Scotland and other UK Brigades send staff to the Fire Service Training College to undertake promotional training courses and examinations. With this qualification, staff are then eligible to apply for Senior positions however are subject to a process very similar to that described at the beginning of this paper, although work samples do figure more prominently. Within Australia, alignment with the Australian Fire Competencies is becoming more prevalent, however the problem remains of determining relative merit amongst a group of candidates with the same qualification or competency profile.

The literature examined in researching this question indicates that considerable benefits are available in three primary areas, organizational, participant and cost benefits.

- More reliable predictions of future performance standards than other methods. (Smith, 1988)
- Reduction in staff turnover due to poor performance, increased possibility of identifying potential. (Seegers, 1989)
- Greater reliability and validity in promotions reduces wrong appointments. (Seegers, 1989)
- Integration into complete HR management system facilitates consistency in application of desired competencies ensuring equitable and defensible assessment. (Thornton, 1992)
- Enables tailoring of training and development to meet individual needs and to ensure continuity in organizations skill base. (Seegers, 1989)
- Probability of increased acceptance in terms of anti-discrimination issues due to use of multiple selection tools (Feltham, 1989), especially so if a thorough job analysis has been completed therefore justifying assessment tools chosen.

- Direct relationship to job and fairness can result in increased morale and confidence in selection process. (Feltham, 1988)

- Participants complete the process with positive feelings regarding the process. (Campbell, 1998)

The participant benefits have the potential to translate into direct organizational benefits through increased morale and confidence with the employer’s intentions. This is through the participants believing assessments are realistic, relevant and allow for demonstration of skills, they value the feedback and its value in adding to their personal development plans and they not only learn about their own behaviour but observe others first hand dealing with the same situations.

The most common argument against the use of assessment/development center methodology within an organization is one of cost. Firstly, the set up costs including consultancy fees for job analysis, assessor training, procedural design and assessment tools and secondly the ongoing costs including time for participants to attend and resourcing implications. However, by applying the findings of studies such as Schmidt et al (1979) which recognise a difference between a good performer and an average performer as being 40% of gross annual salary, long-term advantages become more evident. In dollar terms, in relation to an Area director within QFRA the inference is that the dollar value between a good and average performer is in the vicinity of $30,000. Accepting the findings of Smith’s Meta-Analysis whereby assessment centers have validity ratings of approximately 0.6 compared with the
current QFRA practice of between .01 and .19, considerable advantages are available by reducing the number of average performers appointed.

**PROCEDURES**

This research project employed an evaluative research methodology to examine the problem faced by the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority in relation to merit selection strategies currently utilized, specifically in relation to senior management positions. A review of fire services in Queensland found that procedures do not “necessarily produce merit-selected appointments” (Staib, 1996 p. 232) and that the organization had a predominantly “1950s paramilitary style leadership and management culture” (p. 3).

The procedures developed for this project were aimed at overcoming these issues. This was achieved by evaluating the problems associated with the type of selection strategies currently in use, examining the qualities needed of senior management and identifying means of reliably predicting a candidate’s future performance in such a position.

A literature review of these areas was conducted and the results have been documented. The implications of the identified contemporary thinking are discussed in terms of impact and benefits to the organization and recommendations made for establishing future procedures to overcome the current problems.

**Literature Review**

An initial literature review was conducted at the National Fire Academy’s Learning Resource Center (LRC) during August 1999. The majority of the literature review was conducted within Australia from information obtained from a number of libraries including the Australian Institute of Police Management, the Queensland Department of Emergency Service...
and the Queensland State Library.

Material reviewed primarily consisted of textbooks magazines and journals providing contemporary comment on public sector recruitment and selection issues however the review also examined material specific to the private sector in order to gain a greater overall perspective. A number of studies and articles dating prior to the introduction of the current procedures (1990) were also examined to enable critical analysis of the effectiveness and validity of changes.

**Assumptions and Limitations**

Merit selection strategies within the QFRA are based upon the Australian Public Sector model. Rather than specifically evaluating QFRA procedures this research examined the broader issues associated with merit selection strategies to evaluate their effectiveness. Considering the need to broaden fire services approaches to such issues this approach also included a departure from specifically examining requirements of fire service managers but considered public sector managers in general. This was done based upon the assumption that fire services within Queensland have traditionally been relatively insular and not necessarily kept pace with industry changes and the wider community in issues such as those being considered. An approach other than this could have resulted in a polarized view of the subject based on historical fire service opinions and therefore limiting outcomes.

Although many Executive Fire Officer Program participants were questioned regarding practices within their brigades this information was not widely used due to the considerable differences in organizational structures and cultures as well as markedly different approaches in political climates in key areas such as equal opportunity and anti-discrimination.
**Research Methodology**

Considerable criticism has been leveled at the current merit selection strategies employed by the QFRA. In order to determine the validity of this criticism and identify how to improve the process it was necessary to critically analyze current procedures.

The research was therefore evaluative in nature collecting data on the type of process in use and analyzing the information in order to identify appropriate recommendations.

The first stage was to examine contemporary thinking on merit selection processes through an extensive literature review. The second considered the requirements of future senior managers including links to and influences on organizational culture. The final stage was to identify and consider what options were available to replace the current process and the steps necessary to achieve this.

**Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this study the following definitions of terms is provided.

- **Area Director.** A rank of senior officer typically in control of approximately 100 permanent staff with a budget of approximately AUD$5,000,000.

- **Australasian Fire Authorities Council.** The peak industry body within Australia and the Pacific Rim, consisting of representatives of all Fire Service agencies.

- **Australian Fire Competencies.** A set of standards identifying common competencies required at various levels within Fire Services from base grade to executive level.

- **Competency Based Training (CBT).** A system of training individuals to achieve a particular predetermined level of ability.

- **Merit Selection.** A means of determining relative merit amongst a number of applicants for a particular position.
Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority (QFRA). A statutory body formed in 1997 to provide seamless delivery of all fire and rescue related services to the Queensland community.

Queensland Fire Service. The Government body formed in 1990 as a result of the amalgamation of 83 independent Fire Brigade Boards throughout Queensland.

Regional Commissioner. The Senior most position of the QFRA within a geographic region.

Selection Criteria. A set of approximately seven generically worded criteria used to determine relative merit of applicants based on verbal and written responses.

RESULTS

Research Question 1. What problems are associated with the traditional Public Sector approach?

Whilst thinking on the use and ideology of merit selection remains fairly constant there does exist an evolving change in approaches on how merit should be determined. Burton (1996) refers to a relationship between a person’s job related qualities and those required to perform in a particular position, and notes that identifying and assessing these are “impossible to do without subjective views being applied” (p. 5). Hawke (1996) supports this view, in discussing the effect workplace culture has on selections he suggests that it dominates assessment and can result in institutionalisation of indirect discrimination.

The most commonly identifiable approach to determining the relative merit of applicants is that of utilising a written application, referee checks and a performance interview. Whilst fairly common for such processes to include demonstrations of actual ability, particularly in
technical or task oriented positions, Harrison (1995) points out that when recruiting senior managers, “you don’t ask candidates to demonstrate what they can do, you ask them to talk about what they can do” (p. 34). A common basis for decision making in these circumstances is the applicant’s previous performance, Jansen and de Jongh (1997) suggest that “this can only be effective if the new job does not differ too much from the previous one, otherwise prediction of future performance can be precarious” (p. 6). Thus when considering people for promotion to senior management, a position which is likely to differ significantly from their previous, their use as sole means must be questioned. Harrison’s views are typically true of the current QFRA process. A position description for the rank of Area Director (one level below Regional Commissioner) contains seven generically worded selection criteria requiring candidates to respond in terms of their demonstrated capacity and ability to address the criteria rather than specific requirements of a particular position. The candidates’ responses to the criterion are used to both shortlist and as a basis for determining comparative merit at interview. Subsequent to interview, referee checks are sought from persons nominated by the candidate, anecdotally, these checks serve to only confirm a panel’s opinion and are of doubtful value.

On standard selection criteria Hawke (1996) claims that, “they are very crude tools, the only useful purpose of which is to provide a formula by which a favoured or preferred applicant can be described as the most suitable” (p. 3). Such tools form an integral part of present QFRA techniques and a range of staff within the organization commonly holds the above views.

A theme commonly identified in readings is that a system solely dependant on written applications, interviews and referee checks is “less than reliable and objective” (QPS, 1998, p. 4) and that the challenge is to “test the candidate as a whole person – covering all their qualities”
(Dukes, 1988, p. 65). Davis (1996) agrees, stating that the job interview “is thought to suffer from both a lack of reliability and validity” (p. 191).

**Research Question 2. What needs to be measured when selecting for senior management positions?**

To address the challenges facing the QFRA and other public sector organizations and to place these organizations in positions of future success will require people with distinctive and particular knowledge, skills and attributes or competencies (Dickensen 1993).

Commonly identified throughout the readings was the need to rely less on technical competence as a selection tool at this level and a need to ensure that those selected had and ethical and cultural commonality with the desired position of the organization. Thus whilst there remains a need to ensure that future public sector managers are competent in the more traditional management functions there is a growing need to measure their potential in being able to perform as leaders in order to ensure the organizations future viability.

Kouzes and Posner (1993) conclude that “promotion decisions made solely on the basis of technical competence run the risk of undermining commitment to shared values” (p. 139).

Glaze (1989) reinforces this through his description of the Cadbury Schweppes experience, stating that “specialist or professional expertise may still be an important requirement in many jobs, but behavioural factors are increasingly at the heart of management excellence.”

Both Burton (1996) and Hawke (1996) discuss the influence of existing cultures on the selection of staff and the adverse effect that may have, particularly the perpetuation of that culture. At face value this may lead to an even more clinical approach to merit determination. However, it must be recognised that every organization will be subject to a set of values or
culture and if that culture is not the desired one then the identification of desired attitudes or behaviours in individuals should be actively considered in appointments.

Curtain (1993) highlights the key competencies required are those of leadership, stating that “public sector managers at all levels need to be able to display leadership values” (p. 30). The issue of leadership competencies versus a more traditional managerial skill set is argued by Curtain in terms of good management being related to order and predictability whilst leadership through inspiration, motivation and establishment of common values of staff is able to produce change, “often to a dramatic degree” (p. 38)

The underlying assumption for the successful application of any selection process is a clear understanding of the role to be performed and a matching of selection tests to the requirements of this role to determine the most appropriate candidate. Within the QFRA, at the time of restructure, generic level descriptors were developed for each level within the organization. These descriptors contain information regarding, work level descriptions, level of supervision, characteristics of the level, duties and skills and requirements for progression within the level.

**Research Question 3. How can the future performance of individuals be reliably predicted?**

Dukes (1988) describes the objective as to “assess the candidate as a whole person-covering all his qualities- unlike simpler procedures which may rely, for example, on a trade test plus a simple interview” (p. 65)

This leads to the use of job specific simulations to assess certain requirements in an arguably more objective fashion, however as Dukes (1988) discusses, once any test is subject to interpretation by an assessor, there must be a degree of subjectivity.
The need to develop this profile of an individual's overall capability has been the subject of various research and methodology for the most part of this century. At this point most readings dealing with alternative test methods, particularly those other than psychological or psychometric tend to combine discussion with advantages and disadvantages of assessment centers.

Ulrich (1983) describes a wide range of assessment instruments and stresses the need to ensure that these are specifically related to the particular job. Those discussed include in-basket exercises, written exercises, group discussions, role-plays, and interviews. He claims that “it provides a depth and precision of behavioural observations about individuals which we cannot obtain by any other common assessment methods” (p. 172). The other major advantage highlighted by Ulrich is that the results of the process “are easily translated into training needs” (p. 173).

Whilst Dukes (1988) agrees with this he recognises the complex nature of management and the artificiality of the tests, particularly in the eyes of the candidates and the fact that how people perform under test may not always be representative of future performance. Notwithstanding this, he still argues that such tests are reliable predictors of future management success and that they can “produce better results than any other approach” (p. 71). Davis (1996) describes a similar range of test mechanisms that may be used in similar determinations as well as potential for teamwork, motivation, and cultural compatibility.

On this issue Rohl (1998) discusses the success of assessment/development center methodology to assess members potential for higher office because they have a much higher predictive capacity than traditional selection methodologies, highlighting a high validity rate with regard the prediction of future performance standards.
The literature examined in researching this question indicates that considerable benefits are available in three primary areas, organizational, participant and cost benefits.

The most common argument against the use of assessment/development center methodology within an organization is one of cost. Firstly, the set up costs including consultancy fees for job analysis, assessor training, procedural design and assessment tools and secondly the ongoing costs including time for participants to attend and resourcing implications.

However, by applying the findings of studies such as Schmidt et al (1979) which recognise a difference between a good performer and an average performer as being 40% of gross annual salary, long-term advantages become more evident. In dollar terms, in relation to an Area director within QFRA the inference is that the dollar value between a good and average performer is in the vicinity of $30,000 per annum. Accepting the findings of Smith’s Meta-Analysis whereby assessment centers have validity ratings of approximately 0.6 compared with the current QFRA practice of between .01 and .19, considerable advantages are available by reducing the number of average performers appointed.

A further argument is that through the application of this methodology to existing staff for developmental purposes, there are considerable productivity gains available. Queensland Police Service (Campbell, 1998) estimate the cost per person attending a center at approximately $3,000
DISCUSSION

The recruitment and selection strategy currently utilized by the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority is documented in a series of Departmental HRM Policies. The recruitment and selection policy is authorized by Director General of the Department of Emergency Services. However, despite HR delegations regarding appointment having been passed to Regional Commissioners, there has not been a significant re-evaluation of the policy since the formation of the QFRA as a statutory authority.

As discussed by Harrison (1995), the suggestion that when recruiting senior managers, “you don’t ask candidates to demonstrate what they can do, you ask them to talk about what they can do” (p. 34) is typically true of the current QFRA process. A position description for the senior management position of rank of Area Director (one level below Regional Commissioner) contains seven generically worded selection criteria requiring candidates to respond in terms of their demonstrated capacity and ability to address the criteria rather than specific requirements of a particular position. The candidates’ responses to the criterion are used to both shortlist and as a basis for determining comparative merit at interview. Subsequent to interview, referee checks are sought from persons nominated by the candidate, these checks serve to only confirm a panels opinion and are of doubtful value.

The underlying assumption for the successful application of any selection process is a clear understanding of the role to be performed and a matching of selection tests to the requirements of this role to determine the most appropriate candidate. Within the QFRA, at the time of restructure, generic level descriptors were developed for each level within the organization. These descriptors contain information regarding work level descriptions, level of supervision, characteristics of the level, duties and skills and requirements for progression within
the level. Further, the Australasian Fire Authorities Council has produced six levels of ‘Australian Fire Competencies’ for use by all Services within Australia. The level of Area Director within Queensland most closely aligns with AFC 6. These competency standards are currently being reviewed under the direction of the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA).

Whilst much work has been done on generic requirements of staff at various levels, little has been done with regard the specifics of particular positions. The Australian Fire Competencies are described as reflecting the skills, knowledge and application required to perform competently on the job, what is not discussed is the issue described by various authors (Dulewicz 1989, Woodruffe 1992) as the behavioural patterns which should be specific, observable and verifiable. This approach has led to a position where the justification or demonstration of the relevance of selection criterion and assessment methodology is questionable.

In the case of organizations such as the QFRA where there is a significant degree of technical knowledge required even at the more senior levels and where these competencies have previously been established, selection processes which seek to further examine these are arguably, wasting resources. A preferable solution will be to make the proof of the existence of these competencies pre-requisites and to examine the candidates’ ability to synthesize elements from several core competency areas to establish the best solution of issues specific to the position being applied for. Glaze (1989) reinforces this through his description of the Cadbury Schweppes experience, stating that “specialist or professional expertise may still be an important requirement in many jobs, but behavioural factors are increasingly at the heart of management excellence.”
To address this, there is now a clear need to undertake a thorough analysis of position requirements to identify both critical success factors and relevant selection techniques with an aim to successfully predicting potential of applicants. The issue of administration of these techniques is also one to determine. The need is for the process to be transparent, fair and objective and give all candidates greater opportunity to demonstrate their potential for promotion (Rohl, 1998).

As highlighted by Rohl (1998), “our worth to our organizations is no longer our experience or our qualifications, but rather, the value we add to our organizations. Unless we are adding value we are really only treading water” (p. 4). The importance of this viewpoint on the selection of staff is that unless as employers we are able to select staff capable of adding value, we cannot progress our organizations. This emphasizes the need for the continued development of valid, reliable and appropriate selection methodologies. On this issue Rohl describes the successfulness of assessment/development center methodology to “assess members potential for higher office because they have a much higher predictive capacity than traditional selection methodologies” (p. 4), discussing a high validity rate with regard the prediction of future performance standards.

Dukes (1988) describes the need to assess the candidate as a whole person taking into account all their qualities, where the qualities required have been defined through an analysis of the job. Suggesting that assessment centers are “generally accepted as the most efficient method” (p. 65) to conduct this appraisal. Both Dukes and Clark (1994) agree that for success of this approach, there must be multiple techniques of assessment, multiple assessors, outcomes based on collective judgements, evaluation of dimensions relevant to position and that overall evaluation is made after observation of behaviours.
To justify the adoption of a system such as suggested for the sole purpose of selection the issue of organizational gain versus cost must be addressed. In considering these factors it is necessary to reflect also on the cost and consequences of inaction, that is, to continue with the present system the real cost may be in terms of recruiting/promoting the wrong people. However, the combination of the assessment center with the identification of development needs for individuals begins to answer several questions. Not only would such an approach assist in selecting future staff but also address the issue of succession planning for the organization by providing future applicants with a pathway to the skill set required and by providing existing staff with clear direction for their development needs.

Recognising and acknowledging the problems that exist both with and between current development and selection strategies, there is a clear need for a combined approach to this problem if the QFRA is to maximise its potential and achieve the goals of the organization. The issues of staff development and recruitment and selection are, by definition, both roles that fall under the banner of Human Resource Management and more specifically Human Resource Planning. To continue without a plan that will link all facets can only lead to future failings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To progress the issue there is now a need to adopt several fundamental processes in order to develop a framework that will facilitate the implementation of a policy which will address the problems and maximise the potential for future organizational success through the success of individuals. These processes cannot be conducted separately but must be completed simultaneously to consider all implications.
Research Question 1. What problems are associated with the traditional Public Sector approach?

Result #1. A theme commonly identified in readings is that a system solely dependant on written applications, interviews and referee checks is “less than reliable and objective” (QPS, 1998, p. 4) and that the challenge is to “test the candidate as a whole person – covering all their qualities” (Dukes, 1988, p. 65). Davis (1996) agrees, stating that the job interview “is thought to suffer from both a lack of reliability and validity” (p. 191).

Recommendation #1. That the Executive Management Group of Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority endorse the findings of this research and discontinue current selection strategies for senior managers.

Research Question 2. What needs to be measured when selecting for senior management positions?

Result #1. The underlying assumption for the successful application of any selection process is a clear understanding of the role to be performed and a matching of selection tests to the requirements of this role to determine the most appropriate candidate.

Recommendation #1. That a thorough job analysis be conducted for senior management levels, which will provide detailed and objective information on the requirements of the position not just, the technical competencies desired.

Job analysis provides clear criteria for job performance, it is a systematic procedure for obtaining detailed and objective information about a job that will be performed, or is currently being performed.

The information gathered from such a process is crucial not only to the selection of the most appropriate staff, but also to the development of staff already in position. Basically, it is a
method for defining the required competencies and forms the backbone of a number of human resource issues and decisions. Without such a process being undertaken the decisions may well be based upon false premise.

**Recommendation #2.** That based on the results of job analysis activities a review of current position descriptions is undertaken.

Such a review must take into account all issues related to career progression and job analysis to ensure the true requirements of the position are articulated within the document. A complete and accurate description will facilitate the development of more appropriate selection tools that will be seen as transparent and appropriate by candidates as well as achieving a higher degree of reliability and validity in selections.

This process will undoubtedly cause some confusion, if not conflict with present thinking. In adopting a flatter organizational structure, the present position descriptions have been mainly written for levels within the organization rather than specific positions, as such they do not all adequately address the variety of work undertaken by staff in different positions but at the same level. However, through the development of detailed job specifications for various positions it will be possible to develop position descriptions that account for core requirements and identify specific needs for specific positions.

**Research Question 3. How can the future performance of individuals be reliably predicted?**

**Result #1.** As highlighted by Rohl (1998), “our worth to our organizations is no longer our experience or our qualifications, but rather, the value we add to our organizations. Unless we are adding value we are really only treading water.” The importance of this viewpoint on the selection of staff is that unless as employers we are able to select staff capable of adding value we cannot progress our organizations. This emphasizes the need for the continued
development of valid, reliable and appropriate selection methodologies. On this issue Rohl describes the successfulness of assessment/development center methodology to “assess members potential for higher office because they have a much higher predictive capacity than traditional selection methodologies” (p. 4), discussing a high validity rate with regard the prediction of future performance standards.

**Recommendation #1.** That the Executive Management Group of the QFRA endorses the use of assessment center methodology as a means of senior staff selection.

**Recommendation #2.** That further investigation be conducted as to the use of assessment center methodology be conducted to assess its potential use as a development tool for existing senior managers to enable the enhancement of personal and professional development plans.
**Recommendation #3.** That the following implementation timetable be endorsed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>ACTION</th>
<th>DESIRED OUTCOME</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apr 2000</td>
<td>Presentation to EMG of business case recommending adoption of assessment/development center strategy.</td>
<td>Sign off by EMG including budget for consultancy QPS to progress investigation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2000</td>
<td>Establishment of Steering committee of Dir HR, Dir Staff Devel, 1 Reg Comm. Establishment of advisory group of both unions, independent (CJC?), marketing.</td>
<td>Definition of roles responsibility. Industrial agreement. Develop and publish information book.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2000</td>
<td>Engagement of consultant to conduct Job analysis, define competency areas, identify appropriate assessment tools.</td>
<td>Documentation of job requirements, development of exercises and assessment methodology.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct 2000</td>
<td>Select Assessors.</td>
<td>Assessors identified and trained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2001</td>
<td>Call for participants from existing Senior officers.</td>
<td>Voluntary basis, target 50 %.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The office of the Public Service (1997) in Queensland has highlighted that “the quality of the workforce is a prime determinant of the capacity of an organization to deliver the results required of it.” Further, that “having the right people in the right place at the right time is fundamental to the operation of any successful undertaking” (p. 10).

The literature review of this document has examined varied viewpoints on the topic of merit based selection in terms of what constitutes merit and how comparative merit is established or affected by various bias. Several authors and observers have noted that the traditional and largely accepted methodology common to most public sector agencies can be fundamentally flawed and arguably is far more likely to be subjective rather than objective in its findings.

The QFRA has employed this traditional model since 1990. In the absence of formal performance appraisal systems, there has been little empirical evidence to suggest its shortcomings. There has however been a wealth of dissatisfaction with the system from the staff, with perceptions of appointments being arranged, the wrong people being appointed and good staff not even receiving interviews. The reasons for this do not all lie within the constraints of the system, some are clearly QFRA failings in education. There has also been heavy criticism of the process from an external review of the organization. Notwithstanding this, the process has been one centered on relatively constant selection criteria and predictable if not learnable responses.

The investigation of assessment center methodology have revealed a system which gives a great deal more validity and reliability in results and one which can also be utilised to plan personal development portfolios.
Whilst there are considerable costs associated with the establishment of these centers the benefits in terms of increased productivity, increased morale and employee satisfaction are arguments that cannot be easily dismissed. Although not necessarily simplifying the process as Staib recommended, the adoption of this will provide for a transparent, fair and objective process acceptable to both staff and management and provide for significant organizational gain.
REFERENCES:


Brisbane: Human Resource Division Branch.


