

Comments by the European Personnel Selection Office on a request for an opinion from the European Ombudsman
- Own Initiative Enquiry concerning open competition EPSO/AST/112/10 - Ref. OII/01/2012/MHZ

THE FACTS

In the Official Journal C341A of 16th December 2010 the notice of competition for open competition EPSO/AST/112/10 was published (hereinafter "Notice"). A corrigendum was published in OJ C 68A of 3rd March 2011.

The specific eligibility criteria for the field of Human Resources were described as follows in the Annex to the Notice:

2. Qualifications

Post-secondary education attested by a diploma

OR

a level of secondary education attested by a diploma giving access to post-secondary education, and at least 3 years' professional experience.

NB: The minimum of 3 years' professional experience required counts as an integral part of the qualification and cannot be counted towards the professional experience required below.

3. Professional experience

At least 3 years' professional experience relevant to the nature of the duties, acquired after obtaining the required qualification

Furthermore, the notice explained how admission would be done (point V.1):

You will be admitted * to the assessment tests if you obtain one of the highest total marks^{1 2} in the admission tests, with a pass mark in all of them and if, in the light of the information given in your online application, you fulfil the general and specific conditions listed in Section III.

*Admission will be confirmed subject to subsequent verification of the supporting documents enclosed with your full application. Supporting documents will be verified for candidates who satisfy the eligibility conditions and who have obtained the highest aggregate marks in the assessment tests, in descending order, until the number of successful candidates sought in the notice of competition and who meet the eligibility conditions is reached.

The files of candidates below this threshold will not be examined.

¹ Where a number of candidates tie for the last available place, they will all be invited to the assessment tests

² The number of candidates admitted to the assessment tests will be approximately 2,5 times the number of successful candidates indicated in the competition notice and will be published on EPSO's website (www.eu-careers.eu).

THE INQUIRY

By letter of 19th January 2012 the Ombudsman notified EPSO that he had decided to open an own initiative inquiry to clarify why the supporting documents of candidates are not verified before the invitation for the assessment centre tests is issued.

The Ombudsman more specifically asks EPSO to indicate whether, in competitions in which not more than one hundred candidates qualify for tests in the assessment centre, the Selection Board could verify their supporting documents, in particular those relating to education and professional experience, before the invitations to the assessment centre are issued.

The Ombudsman asks EPSO to take into account, in its reply, (i) the possible savings to the EU budget from such an approach; (ii) the interest of candidates being informed, before they invest time and effort in the assessment centre tests, if their professional experience is not considered relevant; and (iii) the fact that, in "old generation" competitions, the supporting documents were verified before the invitations for written/oral exams were issued.

COMMENTS

For open competition EPSO/AST/112/10, 6514 applicants validated their online application in the field of Human Resources. Out of those, 5442 booked to sit the admission tests and 4750 effectively sat the admission tests.

Ultimately, 2920 obtained the pass mark in these tests as required by the competition notice.

In accordance with Article 5, first paragraph of Annex III to the Staff Regulations and in line with point V of the notice of competition as published in the Official Journal, the selection board drew up the list of 91 candidates who obtained the highest total marks in the admission tests and who, in light of the information given in their online application fulfilled the general and specific conditions listed in the competition notice. These 91 candidates were invited for the assessment centre tests.

This means that ALL candidates invited for the assessment centre tests fulfilled, on the basis of the information in their online application, the general and specific conditions as required by the Notice.

Upon verification of the supporting documents, the selection board concluded that, on the basis of these supporting documents, 6 candidates (in the field of Human Resources) were no longer considered eligible in line with the requirements of the competition notice. The selection board was of the opinion that the supporting documents did not or not sufficiently confirm/validate the information supplied in their online application. However this is not a question of whether or not their professional experience was relevant to the duties as described in the Notice but rather a question of producing evidence of information supplied in the online application. The selection board had already decided, on the basis of this information, that their professional experience WAS relevant in order to admit the candidates, however, on condition that this information was later supported by the necessary documentary proof.

This shows clearly that candidates knew how to draft the information in such a way as to convince the selection board that they were eligible to be admitted to the competition but some failed to support this with the required documents.

Therefore the statement of the Ombudsman that candidates are unaware of the relevance of their professional experience before putting in time and effort for the assessment centre tests is untrue.

It was only for candidates who in the view of the Selection Board, had not provided sufficiently clear evidence of their relevant experience in their online application, that it was obliged to review its initial decision of admission and decide, on the basis of the supporting documents, that the candidate(s) was(were) not eligible after all and therefore their name could not be included on the reserve list.

Nevertheless, if certain candidates feel that the decision of the selection board is not correct, EPSO would like to recall the means of appeal as mentioned in the Guide to open competitions and it would like to draw the attention to the fact that some of these candidates have indeed introduced administrative complaints against the decision of the selection board not to place their name on the reserve list.

With regard to the timing of the verification, it is worth mentioning that according to the Guide for open competitions, the stage at which the supporting documents are verified might change from competition to competition (see Guide for open competitions – point 5.1) but it is only in very exceptional cases that an Institution still insists to have the notice drafted in such a way as to have the documents verified at an earlier stage.

For competitions with a high number of applicants in particular, it is more cost effective and time efficient to do the full verification only before placing successful candidates on the reserve list.

(i) EPSO is asked to comment on the possible savings to the EU budget from the approach of verifying the supporting documents before sending out the invitations for the assessment centre tests for competitions where less than 100 candidates would qualify for such an invitation.

Although a mathematically exact calculation is hard to make, please find herewith a comparison for the situation with verification of supporting documents before and after the assessment centre tests taking into account the number of files to be examined.

For open competition EPSO/AST/112/10 (all fields) a total of 499 candidates were invited to the assessment centre tests.

With the current system, the selection board only needed to verify the supporting documents of 193 instead of 499 which results in less than half the man hours needed to do this verification. Verification of supporting documents is very time consuming and labour-intensive and experience shows (confirmed by this competition) that it is only a very limited number of candidates who are unable to provide the necessary proof of the information they provide. For the competition in question, only 11 candidates (out of 193) were ultimately unable to provide the necessary supporting documents to justify the information given in their online application.

EPSO would like to point out that candidates electronically sign their online application, indicating on their word of honour that all the information provided is "true and complete".

EPSO is convinced that the current method consists in a real saving to the EU budget as compared to the former approach. For the competition in question, the number of man hours required for the selection board to do the verification was less than half compared to

what it would have been under the former system. Given the fact that the competition notice defines the number of candidates to be invited to the assessment centre tests as a multiplication (2.5 times for this competition) of the number of successful candidates, this number is more or less fixed. Verifying the supporting documents before sending the invitations for the assessment centre tests would not have reduced the number of candidates invited and would thus not have led to a saving for the EU budget. For this competition it would have led to a situation where instead of the 11 candidates who were ultimately not able to produce the necessary supporting documents, 11 other candidates would have been invited.

(ii) As already explained above, all candidates invited to the assessment centre tests have been admitted on the basis of the information in their online application and hence have been considered eligible by the selection board on the basis of this information.

EPSO shares the idea of the Ombudsman that it is in the interest of candidates that they are informed, before they invest time and effort in the assessment centre tests, if their professional experience is considered relevant or not, but remains convinced that this is the case in the current system.

If, in line with their declaration on word of honour, candidates have given information which is supported by documents, the verification of these documents will not change their eligibility.

(iii) One of the main objectives of the overhaul in the competition procedure (2010) was to considerably reduce the overall average time of a selection procedure.

Limiting the paper check of the eligibility criteria to those candidates who are eligible to be placed on the reserve list (and who fulfil, on the basis of their own declarations, the general and specific eligibility criteria) involves a considerable time gain as the figures above show.

This is linked to the shift in paradigm regarding the admission phase.

* * *

EPSO hopes that it has provided the Ombudsman with all necessary information in relation to this own initiative inquiry.