Attracting and recruiting public servants

Governments need to attract and recruit staff with an increasingly diverse range of skills to keep pace with today's policy and service delivery challenges. Some of these skillsets are in traditional fields like law or accounting; others are in still-emerging fields, such as data science or user experience design. Governments are in competition with the private sector for these skills, so they try to reach a wider range of candidates and improve the diversity and quality of the candidate pool.

The OECD has developed a new composite indicator on the use of proactive practices to recruit candidates with the skills needed (Figure 6.1). The tools included help employers understand what motivates candidates to apply for a public service position, and thus position themselves as an employer of choice through a variety of communication channels. It also considers their ability to match market wages. Canada, Korea and New Zealand make the widest use of these tools. New Zealand, for example, has an employment portal for government jobs emphasising the values of a diverse public service and explaining the variety of opportunities available. Countries like the Slovak Republic, Slovenia and Turkey may be more constrained by employment systems that do not permit pay flexibility, or use relatively few communication channels.

Governments also need to be able to assess candidates' complex cognitive, social and emotional skills. These are increasingly essential in fast-changing organisations. Table 6.2 shows that 19 out of 32 OECD countries (59%) test for analytical/cognitive competences during standardised testing and 20 (62%) do so using interviews. Behavioural competences are tested through interviews in 24 (75%) OECD countries. However, only 13 (41% of total) test cognitive or behavioural competences using more structured assessment centres which may allow for a more detailed examination in practice. Finally, 26 (81%) OECD countries test candidates' motivation to join the public sector during the interview stage, but only 8 (25%) countries use assessment centres (Table 6.2).

Attraction and recruitment go hand in hand: governments can no longer wait for candidates to come to them. Leading countries actively identify their target candidates and design specific strategies to reach them. This may be harder in closed career-based systems that privilege standardised testing. Increasingly specialised methods for assessing hard-to-assess competences can give public sector recruiters more scope to identify candidates able to perform in complex and uncertain environments. This in turn suggests the need to professionalise recruitment and provide skills development for those involved in selection processes.

Methodology and definitions

Data were collected through the attraction and retention, and recruitment modules of the 2020 Public Service Leadership and Capability survey.

Most respondents were senior officials in central government human resource management (HRM) departments, and the data refer to HRM practices in central government. The survey was completed by all OECD countries except Chile and Iceland, one OECD accession country (Costa Rica), and Brazil and Romania. There are considerable variations in the definition of the civil service as well as the organisations at central government level. Public servants are defined as all government employees who work in the public service, who may be employed through various contractual mechanisms (e.g. civil servant statutes, collective agreements or labour law contracts), on indeterminate or fixed-term employment contracts, but not normally including employees in the wider public sector who are usually regulated under alternative employment frameworks (e.g. most doctors, teachers, police, the military, the judiciary or elected officials). Behavioural competences are personality traits which have been used to predict workplace behaviour with varying reliability depending on the measures.

The composite indicator is made up of the following aspects of employer attractiveness: 1) elements highlighted in recruitment material; 2) policies to attract more and better candidates with in-demand skills; 3) the use of methods to determine what attracts skilled employees; 4) adequate pay systems to attract good candidates; and 5) having actions in place to improve the representation of under-represented groups. The index ranges from 0 (no use of proactive recruitment practices) to 1 (high level of use of proactive recruitment practices). Further details on the composite index are available in Annex E. The variables comprising the index and their relative importance are based on expert judgements. They are presented with the purpose of constructing a pilot index, and so may evolve. Missing data for countries were estimated by mean replacement.

Further reading

OECD (2019), *Recommendation of the Council on Public Service Leadership and Capability*, OECD, *https://legalinstruments. oecd.org/%20en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-0445*.

Figure notes

Data for Chile and Iceland are not available.

6.2. Japan is not included as recruitment criteria are evaluated with different tools depending on the type of examination. Denmark is not included because of the lack of common processes in the central administration. Australia is not included because each agency decides on its recruitment procedures.

6.1. Pilot index: Use of proactive recruitment practices, 2020
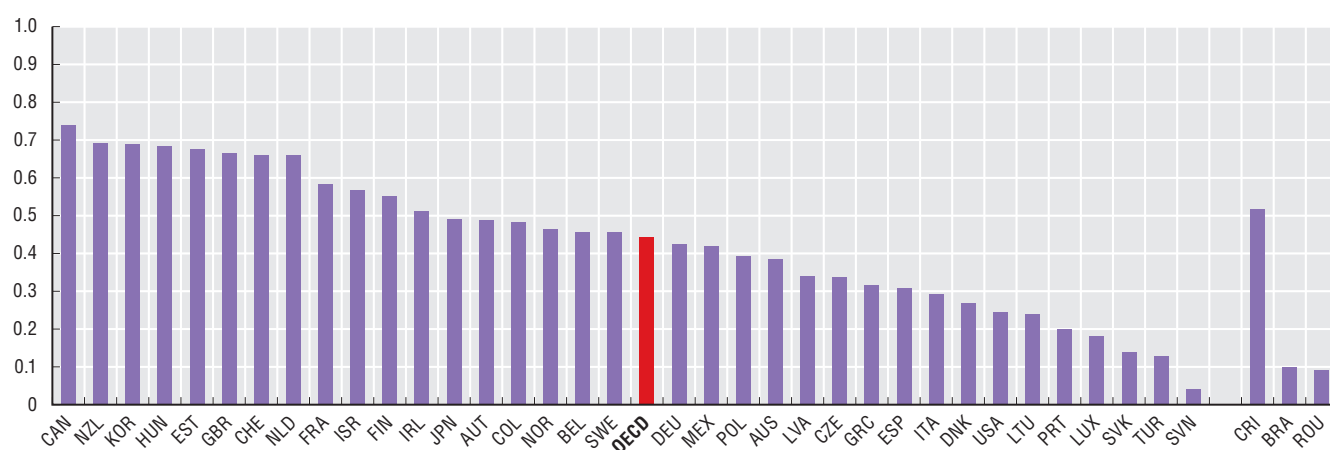
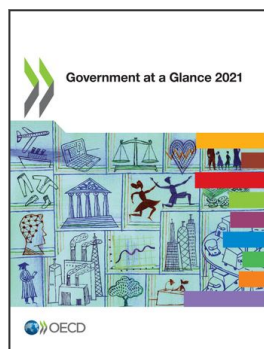*Source*: OECD (2020), *Public Service Leadership and Capability Survey.*

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6.2. Assessing cognitive and behavioural competences and motivation during recruitment, 2020

	CV screening	Standard exams	Interviews	Assessment centre	Reference check
Austria	◆❖		◆❖		
Belgium		■◆	◆❖	◆	
Canada	■◆❖	■◆❖	■◆❖	■◆❖	■◆❖
Colombia		■◆❖	■◆❖		
Czech Republic			■❖		
Estonia		■			◆❖
Finland	■		■◆❖		
France	■❖	■	■		
Germany			■◆❖	■◆❖	
Greece					
Hungary	❖		■◆❖	■◆	
Ireland		■	◆❖	■◆	
Israel		■◆❖	◆❖	■◆❖	
Italy		■			
Korea		■	■◆❖	■◆❖	
Latvia	❖	■	■◆❖	■◆	◆
Lithuania			■◆❖		
Luxembourg		■	◆❖		
Mexico	◆	■◆	■◆❖		
Netherlands	■◆		■◆❖	■	
New Zealand	❖		◆❖	■◆❖	◆❖
Norway			◆❖	◆❖	◆❖
Poland		■	■◆❖	■◆❖	
Portugal			■◆❖		
Slovak Republic		■	■◆❖	■◆	
Slovenia			■◆❖		
Spain		■		■	
Sweden	◆	■	■❖		◆
Switzerland	❖		■◆❖		
Turkey		■	◆❖		
United Kingdom	◆❖	■◆	■◆❖	■◆❖	
United States		■◆	■		
OECD Total					
■ Analytical/cognitive competences	4	19	20	13	1
◆ Behavioural competences	6	7	24	13	6
❖ Motivation	8	3	26	8	4
Brazil		■			
Costa Rica	■◆❖				■◆❖
Romania			◆❖		

Source: OECD (2020), *Public Service Leadership and Capability Survey.*

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