



GUIDANCE ON THE PUBLIC APPOINTMENTS PROCESS

EXAMPLES OF APPLICATION CRITERIA AND ANSWERS

On the following pages we look at four different criteria for a board member role, all of which are fairly typical. We also look at different fictitious answers and assess whether a selection panel would invite the applicant to interview? Here are the criteria that we'll be assessing:

1. The ability to work effectively as part of a team
2. The ability to interpret and apply laws or regulations
3. The ability to influence opinions and outcomes
4. Knowledge of the voluntary sector, particularly in an organisation with links to the health sector

In each case, the answers provided by the applicants will appear in this format:

"Here are the reasons that I should get an interview."

The assessments of the answers will look like this:

Applicant A's response doesn't actually meet the criterion.

- They have simply rephrased the criterion in the first sentence. Rephrasing or paraphrasing the criterion (see Pointers for filling out the form) does not represent evidence that it's been met.
- The applicant goes on to give an "example". This isn't an example of either team working or working effectively as part of a team...



Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments in Scotland

Refer back to the pointers leaflet for filling out the form if you want to remind yourself of what the selection panel are looking for in completed applications.

The selection process is straightforward.

- **Step one is called the “sift”.**

If a significant number of applications are received by the Scottish Government, an official can sift out those applications that haven't met the essential criteria for the role. When this occurs, our OCPAS Assessors check to confirm that the Government's officials have assessed the forms fairly and consistently. When the Government received an average number of applications the selection process starts at step two.

- **Step two is called the short-listing**

Part one of the form (which contains identifying information about applicants) is separated from part two (where applicants answer the criteria for the role). Part two is passed to the members of the selection panel, one of whom is always an OCPAS Assessor. The panel members individually assess applications to select for interview those applicants who have demonstrated that their skills and knowledge most closely match the criteria outlined in the person specification. The members of the panel then come to a collective decision on which applicants should be invited to interview. At every stage of the process, the Scottish Government must provide evidence supporting the decision to rule an application out. This evidence is used to provide feedback to unsuccessful applicants.

If you want to see good answers, and to save you skipping ahead, here's how our applicants did:

Applicant A – no interview
Applicant B – definite interview
Applicant C – no interview
Applicant D – definite interview
Applicant E – no interview
Applicant F – definite interview
Applicant G – no interview
Applicant H – definite interview

ESSENTIAL CRITERIA

The ability to work effectively as part of a team

I have the ability to work effectively in a team. An example of this is when I worked with various organisations as a management consultant. I have also been a member of my son's school board for the past 10 months and hope to be elected for a second term in October.

Applicant A's response doesn't actually meet the criterion.

- They have simply rephrased the criterion in the first sentence. Rephrasing or paraphrasing the criterion (see the Pointers leaflet) does not represent evidence that it's been met.
- The applicant goes on to give an "example". This isn't an example of either team working or working effectively as part of a team. They may have worked with various organisations as a management consultant but there's no evidence provided of what that involved. They may have given a presentation to a room full of senior staff and left them to their own devices; they may have spent a week alone with the Chief Executive telling them where the company was going wrong; they may have worked as part of a team with the senior management of the organisation to effect positive changes. We have no way of telling what the applicant did as a management consultant as they haven't told us what was involved.
- The second example provided again just states a position currently held by the applicant. There's no evidence of effectiveness in that role either for the individual or for the board overall.

Applicant A will not be invited to interview as this is an essential criterion for the role and they haven't provided evidence on the form that they possess the required ability.

The ability to work effectively as part of a team

Several years of experience working as a line manager and a colleague have developed my team working skills. I actively work to establish a common sense of purpose and an understanding of the team's objectives. In my current role as lead manager for the school support team I have successfully established and cemented work relationships on a one-to-one basis, in team meetings and with colleagues both within the school and in central support departments. In the December 2006 HMI Inspection Report my own contribution was acknowledged: "the lead manager for the school support team has completely changed the culture of the support and management teams at the school for the better since our last report". In my previous role as HR Support Manager at Inversnecky College (1998 to 2004) I worked with colleagues within the HR team, where I took lead responsibility for ensuring that staff and management had access to good support in the recruitment and retention of staff for the college, as well as the wider management team. This role was pivotal to the success of the HR team as well as to the success of the college itself. At a time in the late nineties when other colleges in the area were struggling to recruit and retain staff, and many had serious problems such as tribunal claims to deal with, my own contribution to the work of the HR team and the management team meant that we had a superb reputation, had no industrial relations problems and were inundated with high quality applications for every vacancy we advertised. I was able to achieve these results by fostering a culture in which every team member communicated effectively and where we were all aware of our individual goals, our team goals, our individual and collective contributions to these and how they related to the success of the college overall. The college principal, my line manager at the time, thanked me personally and publicly for my contribution to the work of the college.

As a further example, drawn from my personal life, I currently serve as the Vice Chair on the board of a major housing charity. In that capacity, I work proactively with the other non executive directors to constructively challenge and support the executive directors in their work. I do so by first proposing and then leading on sub-committees that look at particular areas of the charity's operation such as risk and financial management. The approach I have adopted and persuaded the other non-executives to introduce, based on maximising the strengths of individual team members to achieve shared goals, empowers our executive directors to find solutions that concur with the strategic direction that the committee wants the organisation to take. I have been in this role for the last year and Communities Scotland, the charity's regulator, has already commented positively in our inspection report on the positive influence that my way of working has had on the board overall.

Applicant B's response answers the criterion.

- They have told us what team/s they belonged to and what their role was in each.
- They've told us how their personal contribution made a difference to the success of the teams that they worked with.
- They have also given examples of positive outcomes that arose out of their working in this way.
- They have provided more than one example.

Applicant B has provided sufficient evidence that they meet this essential criterion for the role. If they provide answers of an equivalent quality for the other criteria for the role they will be invited for interview.

The ability to interpret and apply laws or regulations

I am currently vice-chair of the Agricultural Wages Committee for Inversnecky and Chair of the Divisional Independent Advisory Group for Southern Constabulary. I am also a member of the Professional Conduct Appeal Committee for the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). I am therefore able to challenge and interpret regulatory processes to ensure that they are fair, open and transparent. My working method is to disambiguate in order to identify the core semantic sense of Acts and statutory extensions, modifications, amendments or re-enactments.

Applicant C's response doesn't actually answer the criterion.

- They have provided a list of three job or role titles.
- They may think that just giving the panel the job or role title is enough information. They may assume that, because they know what's involved in working in these roles or jobs, the selection panel members will know too. The reality is that the panel can't and won't make assumptions about applicants on the basis of jobs or roles held. A job or role title in and of itself isn't evidence that someone is effective in a role.
- The applicant hasn't given any examples of their demonstrating this ability.
- They haven't explained when or how they challenged and interpreted regulatory processes.
- They haven't given any examples of positive outcomes related to their use of the required ability.
- We have no evidence on this basis that the applicant has the ability to interpret laws or regulations. Simply stating that one has an ability is not evidence that one does.
- The addition of legal or business jargon is also not evidence that the applicant has the required ability. Applicants should address the criteria for a role using plain English.

Applicant C will not be invited to interview as this is an essential criterion for the role and they haven't provided evidence on the form that they possess the required ability. Applicants have to assume that the panel members know nothing about them or the work that they do. This also applies to job or role titles. As an applicant, if you want to supply evidence related to a job or role that you fulfil then that's fine but you have to spell things out for the panel.

The ability to interpret and apply laws or regulations

In my five years as a practising solicitor with a family law solicitors the interpreting of statutes and case law has always been central to my role. I consult and refer to legislation on an almost daily basis and interpret the meaning of the provisions in the context of each client's case. This often involves taking a broad legal principle, such as "the right to respect for private and family life" and interpreting what that means in real terms. For example, one case involved me advising on how far social workers should be allowed access to a child against the parents' wishes. In the past six months I also provided advice to an individual going through a stressful and complex divorce on their rights and, in the interests of establishing the best possible outcome for them, assisted them through the mediation process. This saved my client a great deal of money, not to mention the distress that my proposed approach avoided, and led to their writing a letter of commendation to the senior partner of the firm. The client has since confirmed that they want all of their legal matters, amounting to tens of thousands of pounds of business for our firm per annum, to be handled by me personally. In these and all my other cases I apply the requirements of the legislation and the principles of case law to the facts of my client's situation to provide them with advice on the strength of their legal position. I have advised dozens of clients over the last five years and successfully represented many of these clients in courts and tribunals. In doing so, my interpretation of the relevant law has been approved by several judges and tribunal Chairs.

Applicant D's response meets the criterion well.

- The applicant explains what they do – they don't ask the panel to make assumptions on the basis that they are a practising solicitor.
- The applicant has provided concise examples which show their personal involvement, the recency with which they have had to effectively demonstrate their knowledge, the frequency with which they have had to do so and the role involved.
- Their answer is relevant to the criterion and they have linked it to positive outcomes.

This is a good answer. This applicant will be invited to interview if their other answers are of an equivalent quality.

The ability to influence opinions and outcomes

In the field of Employee Relations there is a constant search for improvements through the changing of attitudes, opinions and dated practices. When delivering training sessions about the value of a diverse workforce, overcoming initial scepticism is essential.

Applicant E's response doesn't actually answer the criterion.

- They have provided statements about the value of having this ability. These could have been copied from a textbook.
- They have provided some general advice on what might need to be done to influence opinions and outcomes. This also could have been copied from a textbook.
- Whether or not the panel assessing this application agrees with the statements above, or the general advice, this doesn't actually answer the criterion.
- The candidate hasn't given any examples of their demonstrating this ability.
- They haven't explained when or how they worked in this way. They may have worked in Employee Relations and delivered training on the value of diversity in that role but they haven't made this explicit. The candidate probably included this example to demonstrate an ability to overcome initial scepticism but there's no evidence provided that they have done so successfully. This is a common mistake made by applicants. There is a tendency to answer criteria in this way: "In order to X one must Y" when in fact to answer correctly the applicant should be saying "In order to X I did Y on A, B and C occasions" and then list the successful outcomes.
- They haven't given any examples of positive outcomes related to their use of the required ability.
- We have no evidence on this basis that applicant E has the ability to influence opinions and outcomes.

Applicant E will not be invited to interview as this is an essential criterion for the role and they haven't provided evidence on the form that they possess the required ability.

The ability to influence opinions and outcomes

In my current role as Head of Human Resources for the Tip-Top insurance company I successfully persuaded the directors of the company to introduce some new policies in 2004, including a work-life balance policy and a revised diversity and equal opportunities policy, the proposals for which were not initially well received. To introduce these policies I first conducted a great deal of research that highlighted the advantages for the company that the introduction of these policies would generate. I produced a series of reports for the directors and spoke to these at a number of strategic meetings that looked at various workforce issues. By referring to the research and presenting cogent arguments against the many objections that were raised at these meetings I was eventually able to persuade the majority of skeptical executive and non executive directors of the business advantages of introducing policies that maximised the contribution of the existing workforce and engendered a more diverse workforce. I used my interpersonal and communication skills to ensure that each director had an opportunity to raise their individual concerns about the proposals and to have these addressed by my responses. A team of directors, including myself, then worked together in consultation with existing staff to ensure that the workforce understood and bought in to the new policies and practices. Once these policies were introduced, the company saw huge increases in productivity and staff satisfaction. These benefits were over and above those relating to the fact that we were able to increase the diversity of our workforce well beyond previous levels and led the majority of our competitors in terms of employment good practice. Another benefit of the policies was that our customer base also grew and became more diverse due to the growing reputation of our company as a good equal opportunities employer. I was personally named as a pivotal figure in increasing company value and shareholder returns, directly attributed to my introducing these new ways for the company to operate, in the two annual reports issued to our shareholders in 2005 and 2006.

In my previous role I was the Area Human Resources Manager for the Beezer Bank for 4 years. Throughout that time I conducted regular training sessions for staff on topics such as "Valuing diversity in the workplace" and "Is the customer always right?" On each occasion that I delivered these courses I encountered some reluctance and even hostility from staff members who did not see the value of the training. Through group discussions and practical exercises I always succeeded in changing these people's opinions by the end of the training session, as evidenced by the excellent feedback which the company received.

Applicant F's response meets the criterion well.

- The applicant explains what they did – they don't ask the panel to make assumptions on the basis that they are an HR Manager.
- The applicant has provided concise examples which show their personal involvement, the recency with which they have had to effectively demonstrate their knowledge, the frequency with which they have had to do so and the role involved.
- Their answer is relevant to the criterion and they have linked it to positive outcomes.

This is a good answer. This applicant will be invited to interview if their other answers are of an equivalent quality. What's also interesting about this answer is that it provides evidence that might be referred to in relation to other criteria for a role. There is, for example, evidence of working as part of a team in this answer that could be expanded on elsewhere on the form or at interview.

Knowledge of the voluntary sector, particularly in an organisation with links to the health sector

I am the Chief Executive of a charity with good links to the health service. I therefore know about the voluntary sector and its links with the health sector. In my role I am required to:

- meet with representatives from the local health board to discuss my charity's need for more funding
- advise my executive committee how much funding we need and how much we get from the local health board
- keep our volunteers informed about our funding situation
- provide content on how the organisation is doing for our annual reports and website
- line manage several senior staff

It is vital to have knowledge of the voluntary sector and the health sector to be able to achieve these tasks. If I were to be appointed to the role of board member I would increase my knowledge of the voluntary sector and the health sector by forging links with and between health boards and other voluntary organisations.

Last year our charity received £20,000 from the local health board. We spent this money very wisely and received confirmation of this from the health board when we told them how the funds had been expended. I know many of the board members on the local health board personally and am a good friend of the Chair's.

Applicant G fails to meet this criterion. It looks superficially as though it might be a good answer but in fact, if you refer to the pointers for completing a form, you'll find that the applicant has made some basic errors:

- they have paraphrased the criterion without addressing it
- they have provided part of their job description without telling us that they actually do these things, successfully or otherwise
- they have included some details, such as line management responsibilities, that bear no relation to the criterion
- they have made an assertion about what it is vital to do without telling us that they actually do it
- they have used the third person rather than discuss their own involvement
- they have given theoretical answers
- they have used passive statements
- the applicant goes on to state that they know many of the board members and that they are a friend of the Chair. Knowledge of the voluntary sector is sought – not knowledge of the board members and Chair. This will therefore have no bearing on the decision as to shortlisting and this applicant's answer does not meet the criterion. Even though the Chair (who will probably be assessing this application) might recognise the applicant from their form, they are strictly prohibited by the Code from taking additional information about the applicant into account. Only the applicant's answer can be considered.

Because of all of this, the panel has no way of knowing whether this person actually has the knowledge that they purport to. Applicant G will not be invited to interview.

Knowledge of the voluntary sector, particularly in an organisation with links to the health sector

I work on a voluntary basis for a charity that receives Scottish Executive funding. My role is to work with other voluntary organisations to prepare joint funding bids. The money that we fundraise or receive from government is used to provide home care and respite services for vulnerable older people with ill health problems. I am the primary coordinator for all funding bids and every one that I have submitted annually over the past five years has been successful. Bids are only successful if they display a real understanding of voluntary organisations and how they interact with the wider communities that they serve and the health sector on a local and national basis. In this role, in which I am in regular contact and work closely with the five largest voluntary sector providers of health care and support in Scotland, I have successfully forged links between these organisations and 12 of Scotland's territorial health boards. I was able to forge these successful links because of my detailed knowledge of the work and activities of the charities and how this dovetails into the needs and goals of the individual health boards. The work that I have done has been recognised as exemplary by three of these territorial health boards at public meetings. On the basis of the work I have done, and because of the real understanding of the work of many other voluntary sector providers that I was able to bring to the table, I was invited to become a board member for the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations, a position I have held for the past two years. In that capacity I was asked by my fellow board members to represent SCVO at some key funding talks with representatives from the Scottish Executive held over the past six months. The outcome of these talks was highly successful and I and my fellow board members attribute this success to my ability to knowledgeably and accurately answer all of the questions that the Scottish Executive had on voluntary sector involvement with health sector bodies at a national and local level.

Applicant H's response meets the criterion well.

- The applicant explains what they do – they don't ask the panel to make assumptions on the basis that they volunteer for a charity or serve as a board member of SCVO.
- The applicant has provided concise examples which show their personal involvement, the recency with which they have had to effectively demonstrate their knowledge, the frequency with which they have had to do so and the roles involved.
- Their answer is relevant to the criterion and they have linked it to positive outcomes.

This is a good answer. This applicant will be invited to interview if their other answers are of an equivalent quality. This applicant has chosen to answer the criterion by reference to what they do as a volunteer and not by reference to any paid position. How an applicant has gained the knowledge or skills that they have is not important in this selection process.