

Public Service Commission of Samoa 2017.



**A POLICY TO GUIDE MERIT-BASED  
RECRUITMENT & SELECTION**

## INTRODUCTION;

This policy guideline is one of the first steps in promoting a culture of Merit-based Recruitment & Selection for positions in the public service.<sup>1</sup> It is also a living document that will evolve with any future changes in the context of improving the process of Recruitment & Selection. In championing a “*One Public Sector - One Vision for Good Governance – One Policy*” aimed at harmonizing Human Resource policies and processes, Cabinet in its decision (FK(17) 27) of 26 July 2017 endorsed this policy guideline to standardize merit-based recruitment, selection and appointments to all positions within the public sector, featuring Ministries, independent offices and state-owned enterprises.

Monitoring and evaluating devolved Human Resource management practices is a core function of the Office of the Public Service Commission. Data collected from government agencies’ (under the mandate of the PSC) Recruitment & Selection practices in the past years show a significant level of non-compliance leading to an erroneous assessment of merit.

Observations from monitoring and evaluating government agencies’ Recruitment & Selection practices is quite worrying especially when little effort is seen to address the proper management and control of R&S documentation to substantiate decisions made on appointments. Subjectivity is also a perceived issue and usually raised by applicants in appeals and grievances lodged against appointments and the implementation of the process itself. These are indications that Ministries may be pre-empting the proper assessment of merit. The latter is also assumed when there are internal applicants applying to jobs and are favored because of their inside knowledge and understanding of the Ministry.

The Samoa Public Service Recruitment & Selection System is promoted as a free and open process where anyone can apply, and a reflection of such practices undermines the founding principles of merit-based selection. For merit-based selection to work, it must be done right from the start of the process of reviewing the job and setting the job criteria/competencies for recruitment, and the assessment to guide the decision of who to appoint.

The Office of the Public Service Commission have in place certain processes to guide Merit-based assessments such as the selection of the Panel and confidentiality of the Process. Guidelines in managing conflicts of interest have also been developed to assist employees in identifying and managing perceived conflicts of interests when involved in the Recruitment & Selection process. Having in place also good and effective records management practices is important to support a fair and transparent process of recruitment and selection.

A revised method of assessment is now operationalized by government agencies for positions under the Chief Executive Officers’ authority that closely rank candidates in order of the four

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<sup>1</sup>Vanessa Barlow Schuster, (2015) “*Review on the Process for Recruitment and Selection of Contract Employees under the Public Service of Samoa*” Final Recommendation Report

merit factors. This method has been used for the assessment of applicants to contract positions since 2014.

It is therefore critical to ensure that there are relevant tools and criteria to effectively manage the Recruitment & Selection Process for the proper assessment of the most meritorious people to jobs. All head agencies and those in senior management positions have a responsibility to promote fair and unbiased merit-based recruitment practices especially when they take part as panel members or has a role to carry out in the process.

## **PURPOSE**

The Samoa Public Service Commission promotes a high performing public sector to continuously deliver its services effectively and efficiently to its citizens.<sup>2</sup> Like any government of the day, Samoa's national priorities is to reap results through *Sustainable Development and Broadening Opportunities for All*.<sup>3</sup>

Human Resources play a critical role in the process to ensure Government achieves its overarching goals and development objectives. The broad mandate for the Samoa Public Service Commission is to facilitate and expedite the recruitment, management and development of Human Resources. For an organization to accomplish its objectives, it is essentially vital that they take seriously a process/strategy to ensure that appropriate people who match the specified job requirements are appointed. Such an approach based on merit is being legislated in the Public Service Act 2004 in relation to the Recruitment and Selection System to facilitate the appointment and promotions of Government employees to any position within the Public Service, and to ensure that they are well motivated, acknowledged, retained and rewarded for their contribution to the organization's achievements.

'*Merit Based-Recruitment*' have always been widely applied and promoted for Samoa Public Service jobs. A policy guideline is therefore fundamental to further strengthen, standardize and benchmark the Recruitment and Selection process/operation for the proper assessment of Merit aimed at ensuring fairness, transparency and according equal opportunities in the selection and appointment of people to Samoa public service careers.

### **Samoa Public Service Legislation**

The current foundation of Merit-based Recruitment & Selection is based on;

- 1) *A person's qualifications,*
- 2) *Experience and past work performance,*
- 3) *Personal attributes and;*
- 4) *Skills and abilities.*<sup>4</sup>

For a small country like Samoa, cultural mannerisms and ties can at most times be influential factors at play in the assessment of merit. Therefore as good employers, the Commission and CEOs are to make decisions on appointments and promotions in a fair, and transparent

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<sup>2</sup>Office of the Public Service Commission's Corporate Plan 2015-2019

<sup>3</sup>Strategy for the Development of Samoa; 2016/17-2019/20

<sup>4</sup>Section 36, Assessment of Merit, *Public Service Act 2004*

manner.<sup>5</sup> All actions pertaining to recruitment and selection must be impartial and objective, with any form of preferential treatment or nepotism to be avoided and/or well managed.

## **MERIT-BASED SELECTION**

### **Concept of Merit**

Merit-based selection is generally defined as a system of selecting and appointing employees based on their abilities to carry out the duties and responsibilities of a position's roles, and is to be assessed against objective job competencies and descriptors.<sup>6</sup> The concept is widely applied for the recruitment and selection policies to which Samoa has used as a premise for its own context.

For countries like Australia and New Zealand, their governance systems have always been core models in shaping Samoa's Public Service Human Resource systems and processes. Recruitment & Selection of government employees follow a Merit system of selection based on the Westminster model, where democratic forms of government should operate an apolitical, professional public service providing impartial advice, implementing good governance through integrated systems, policies and programmes<sup>7</sup>.

Other prominent models is Singapore who is well known for its strategies in Human Resource Development, Productivity Management and *Merit-based Recruitment and Selection*. Singapore puts emphasis on knowledge-based economic development, people development, economic empowerment and lifelong learning, and has become a role model for many economies around the world.<sup>8</sup>

### **Application to Samoa Public Service**

This policy guideline must be applied to the Recruitment and Selection Systems in operation for all position levels of the Samoa Public Sector - Chief Executive Officers (heads of agencies), Contract employees/Senior Executives and General Employees (permanent and temporary employees).

The recruitment and selection processes are similarly structured based on the principles of merit but are distinguished by the levels of authority that make decisions on appointments and the management, administration of categorized position levels. The development of this policy provides different ways to properly manage the assessment of Merit for consistency in interpretation, application and importantly to inform sound decision making on appointments and promotions.

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<sup>5</sup>Section 18, Principles of Employment, *Public Service Act 2004*

<sup>6</sup>Definition crafted from Fiji Public Service definition of Merit; *Open Merit based R&S Guideline*, January 2016

<sup>7</sup> Australian Public Service Commission, *Merit-based Policy*, 2010

<sup>8</sup>*How Singapore is Fixing its Meritocracy*, an article by Kenneth Paul Tan, Washington Post, April 2016

### ***Chief Executive Officers (CEOs)***

There are eighteen (18) Government agencies whose Human Resources are managed and administered under the mandate of the Public Service Commission. Fourteen (14) are Government Ministries by order of the Ministerial Departmental Arrangement Act 2003. The Office of the Public Service Commission as a constitutional authority is included as well as three (3) statutory bodies operating under their own mandate but authorize the Commission to be the employing authority of their human resources.

With the exception of the Chairman who heads the Office of the Public Service Commission, the heads of these agencies or Chief Executive Officers are appointed under a due process of Merit-based Recruitment & Selection. The administration of the Recruitment & Selection Process for a CEO position is done by the Office of the Public Service Commission and involves reviewing the job, advertising the position, selection of panel members, interview, and reporting/recommending to Cabinet the most meritorious candidate for a Chief Executive Officer position. Chief Executive Officers are then appointed by the Head of State on the advice of Cabinet under an employment contract of three (3) years.

### ***Other Contract Officers***

The Commission also administers the Recruitment and Selection of second level contract employees such as Assistant Chief Executive Officers and School Principals. Similar to CEOs, these positions operate under a contractual mode of employment to closely monitor work performance that is guided by agreed key targets.

Term officers are employed within a specific timeframe such as Project Coordinators or Managers for development projects. The establishment of these positions are vetted by the Commission while the recruitment, selection and management of their employment is the responsibility of the relevant Chief Executive Officer. Appointments to these temporary positions also follow a process of Merit-based selection.

### ***Permanent/General Employees***

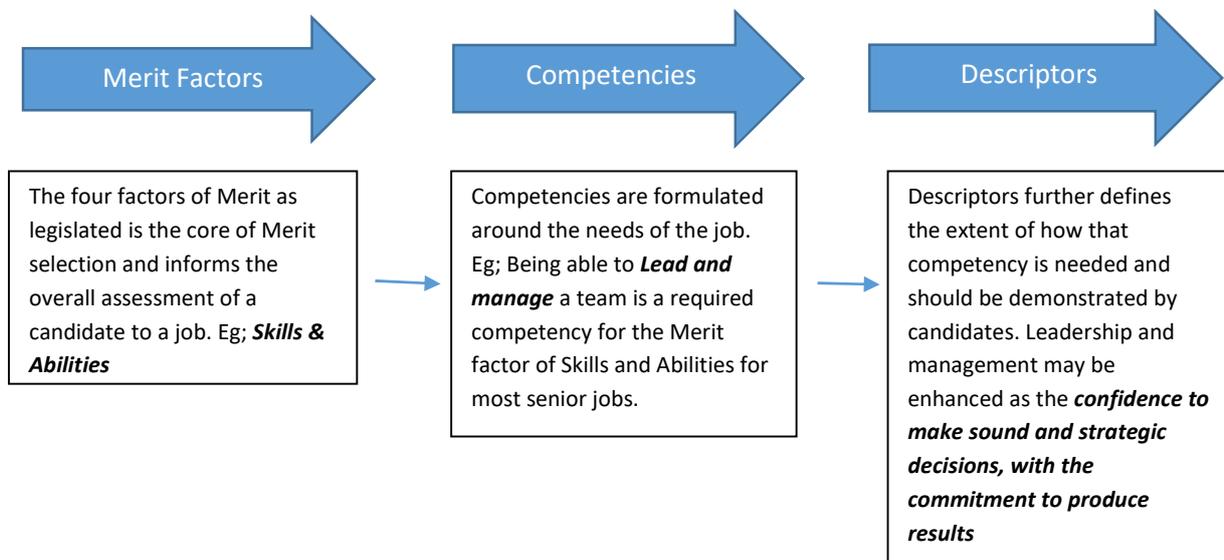
The appointment and management of permanent employees is the responsibility of head agencies while the Office of the Public Service Commission monitors operations by line agencies and provides advice on implementation to ascertain Merit-based selection.

Administrative oversights in the process of Recruitment & Selection are addressed under the Grievance process by the relevant Chief Executive Officer or alternatively the Office of the Public Service Commission. A permanent employee can also appeal to review a decision by the Chief Executive Officer on an appointment if it was merit-based. Appeals by permanent employees are lodged to the Office of the Public Service Commission who attempts to mediate prior to being referred to the Board of Appeal, if they are not resolved from mediation. The Board of Appeal reviews a decision on an appointment if it was merit-based and may decide to allow, disallow an appeal to proceed or decide that an appointment or promotion cannot continue.

## MERIT FACTORS;

Competency frameworks have been developed to guide merit-based recruitment and selection. Merit factors as legislated under the Public Service Act have been benchmarked to guide merit assessment, using competencies or job standards to define the required behaviors and abilities that candidates for a job must have and demonstrate to perform effectively and produce the outputs of a job. Job descriptors are an enhancement of the competencies explaining the relevant level of requirements for a position.

For consistency and best practice, the example below provides guidance in developing competencies and descriptors flowing from merit factors;



All four merit factors are important and therefore must always be valued the same. In other words, the assessment of merit should not be weighed or emphasized on one or two of the four merit factors but to be considered fairly across for a balanced assessment.

A points system is used to rate applicants based on each merit factor. The points system comprise of a scoring process to be done by the panel of assessors ranking from 1, 2, 3 and onwards. An applicant with the least total in points from the ranking carried out is considered the applicant with the most merit.

## **Assessment Tools**

The following tools and processes are normally used in the assessment of merit. These are further specified in the Recruitment and Selection guideline Manuals;

1. *Short-listing* entails the screening of applications or expressions of interest for a job vacancy to assess the suitability of applicants for the next step of the recruitment process.
2. *Tests/Examinations* are usually in the form of scenario questions that relate to the job and are presented to the candidates to further gauge their level of skills, cognitive/mental abilities, depth of experience and past work performance.
3. *The interview* is the face to face discussion conducted by the selected panel to validate and confirm the merits of candidates in written claims that would facilitate the key roles, duties and responsibilities of the position they applied to.
4. *Integrity checks* are important in validating personal attributes, experience and past work performance of candidates with former employers. Integrity checks should not just be confined to declared referees and should include an enquiry into an applicants' character, work performance with previous employers, scrutiny of performance appraisals, confirmation of qualifications and police record.

## **A Guide to the Assessment of Merit Factors**

### **Educational Qualifications**

Qualifications are an important merit element for most, if not all positions in the public service. The merit factor of qualification describes and sets the required level of the qualification that a person should have for employability.

Different qualifications are required for Samoa Public Service positions and are set to match job requirements. A degree in Law cannot be an essential qualification for a position specializing in aviation or engineering unless there are responsibilities that relate to policy, legal or regulatory requirements of the job. Qualifications are set to relate to the core needs of jobs which can be in the form of a tertiary or an accredited vocational/trade qualification acquired from University or a registered education provider. Certificates from general trainings in basic computing or office administration are important and are also counted for particularly minimal administrative jobs such as office assistants and secretaries.

Public Administration jobs represent the bulk of Samoa Public Service positions and are set at the minimum level of a formal qualification depending on the classification of a position. The profession of teachers as an example requires the minimum of a formal teaching degree qualification in order to teach in a government school. The minimum level of the required qualification from Officer to the Chief Executive Officer level is usually set at the degree or tertiary level. The field of the qualification can be specified to relate to the job such as a

Bachelor of Accounting or Economics for an Accountant or an Audit Examiner position. Educational qualifications can also be generally set to draw in a good number of applicants with the discretion by the selecting panel to decide what field(s) relate to the position's duties and responsibilities.

The assessment of qualifications require that all and not just the essential ones are considered. Based on an Appeal matter that was determined by the Board of Appeal, in assessing the most meritorious person for the qualification factor;

*“Section 36 of the PS Act obliges the selection panel when assessing merit for a person’s educational qualifications to consider **ALL** the educational qualifications of that person relevant to the position. Not just the essential qualifications.”<sup>9</sup>*

The following is to be considered and applied for consistency when assessing qualifications;

- The applicant with the highest level of the formal qualification should be ranked higher even if it exceeds the minimum qualification set for a job. If the set qualification is a Bachelor degree and one applicant has a higher qualification of a Masters, the Masters holder should be ranked higher than the other applicants holding Bachelor degrees.
- In addition to the minimum requirement set for formal qualification, all other relevant qualifications count, such as qualifications acquired from specialized and/or general trainings to certifications with registered bodies such as the Certificate of Public Accountancy (CPA) issued by the Samoa Society of Accountants.
- When rating the relativity of qualifications (or any other merit factor), an applicant who has additional/more certificates in specialized areas that are relevant to the job should be ranked higher than other applicants holding only the minimum qualification requirement.

When the required qualification is determined at the least level or generalized at the tertiary level, the minimum requirements for other factors of merit such as skills and abilities, and experience are to be emphasized to reflect the complexity of the position. Setting the qualification requirement (or for any other merit factor) should not be tailor-made for particularly internal employees but in a generic and open way for external candidates to be able to apply. For some minimal jobs, they do not really require formal qualifications but just a pass or completion of secondary level with understanding or know-how of the job which is initially determined from the job classification process.

### **Skills & Abilities:**

The merit factor of skills and abilities usually tests a person's aptitude to perform in a job. Some of the most common skills and abilities applied to senior positions with management and leadership expectation are strategic and analytical skills, time management with an inclusive leadership approach when it comes to decision making.

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<sup>9</sup>*Malama Maria Solomona (1<sup>st</sup> Appellant), Paulo Aukusitino (2<sup>nd</sup> Appellant) v Public Service Commission (2013)*

Skills and abilities are part and parcel of education and are enhanced through work experience and continuous trainings. Because of the relativeness of a skill and the ability of a candidate (which must be demonstrated) to apply it to a job, they have been integrated and assessed as one merit factor.

In a matter where an appointment was overturned to appoint candidate B rather than candidate A as recommended by the selected panel on the assessment of Skills & Abilities;

*” The vast difference in the relative work experience of the two candidates is difficult to see how A with only 2 years work experience {that was well demonstrated in the face to face interview} could outrank candidate B who has more than 10 years of work experience in a wide variety of roles with regards to skills and abilities... honed, enhanced and expanded upon through work experience.”<sup>10</sup>*

Required skills and abilities vary for positions and depend on the nature and complexity of the job. For records administration jobs as an example, basic skills in records maintenance such as filing, sorting and distribution is a requirement for particularly assistant to officer level positions. For higher level positions, skills and abilities become more focused on supervising, organizing and planning for efficient and effective management of records.

Skills acquired from trainings may be physically verified from completion certificates of the trainings. However, the panel of assessors may at times tend to evaluate the skills and abilities factor at face value because of the impressive presentation skills of the candidate in the interview, and disregards the work experience component which should further verify how it was applied and perfected in practice from a previous job. It is important then to consider other merit factors especially work experience as a contributing factor to the skills and abilities of a candidate.

Skills-set and how well a candidate is able to apply them to the job is difficult to accurately assess and it is important that they be weighed and assessed together with other merit factors such as qualification and work experience. For consistency when assessing this merit factor, it is important also to apply other assessment tools for applicants to demonstrate and apply skills and abilities to a given scenario. For the Recruitment & Selection of contract employees administered by the Office of the Public Service Commission, analytical skills with abilities to think strategically or outside of the box are verified through a process of examination. The applicants are given a scenario that relate to the position vacancy they have applied, to address an issue, identify possible challenges and provide solutions for improvement.

The use of assessment tools in place under the Recruitment & Selection Process is important here especially when evaluating merit factors of skills and abilities as well as personal attributes which may be difficult to measure at face value from an applicant’s written claims and during the interview.

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<sup>10</sup>PSC meeting minutes, 2013/41, 16 October 2013

## Experience and Past Work Performance

Experience & past work performance is assessed on both the *quality and quantity* of the claimed experience relating to the job. Quantity or length in years is used to benchmark the required number of years of work experience but emphasis is usually on the quality of that experience and how an applicant demonstrates it to facilitate the job.

It is a general expectation of a panel member that the more years served, the more experience that the applicant may have gained and should demonstrate. In a panel's assessment, this may happen *vis a vis* especially when an applicant with the least years of experience exhibits impressive strategic, analytical abilities, compared to an applicant with the most years of working experience.

Experience and past work performance should be thoroughly considered to avoid errors in the assessment and must be verified not just from the interview but through further background checks. Both years of the work experience and the quality of the experience should be considered. In a decision also on an appointment for an ACEO position where the recommendation by the panel of assessors was overturned;

*“Candidate B who was ranked 2<sup>nd</sup> was reassessed to have more merit than candidate A, who was the recommended appointee. Candidate B has worked for more than 10 years in the public sector under a range of jobs as a former ACEO (3 years), Deputy Director for an NGO (1 year), Project Manager (2 years), international organization (2 years), an officer for a government agency (3 years) compared to A who has had only two years’ experience in a supervisory position and three years’ experience in the public sector.”<sup>11</sup>*

To assess experience and past work performance;

- Selection panels need to consistently review experience not just on seniority or length in years an applicant worked. The quality of that experience must be verified through the use of assessment tools.
- The relevance of an applicant's experience and how much and how well in terms of knowledge and understanding, character and behavior is to be measured to ensure right match for jobs. Integrity checks are encouraged to validate the claims of applicants based on the factors of merit either through a test of personal attributes, experience and past work performance.
- Agencies must carry out full background check of character, work performance with previous employers, evidence of performance appraisals as well as the verification of qualifications and police record (if any).

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<sup>11</sup>PSC meeting minutes, 2013/41, 16 October 2013

## **Personal Attributes**

For any organization, a culture of professionalism, work value and ethics are important ingredients to deliver on its services. The merit factor of personal attributes is very important and is usually assessed on the inherent character of an applicant based on the level of commitment, initiative, intelligence, reliability, honesty, integrity and values to deliver the job to support the overall objectives of an organization. Sometimes, dependent on the nature of the job that could be labor intensive, personal attributes are assessed physically through fitness, physique, etc.

Personal Attributes are relative to other merit factors such as experience and past work performance, skills and abilities. In most cases for instance, personal attributes such as commitment and initiative can be measured on an applicant's character or attitude shown in a work project he/she had been involved in from a previous job and the success or not of that project. Management and leadership positions at the ACEO level places importance on the character of an applicant and how much and well certain personal attributes can be applied to motivate and strategically drive work objectives, or lead and manage a team.

Personal Attributes are always difficult to assess at face value or from the written application of a person who has expressed interest in a position. Assessment tools such as the interview or face to face discussion with applicants is an important part of merit-based selection to confirm written claims relating to attributes such as commitment and initiative applied in previous work performed. Integrity or character reference checks are important to confirm and verify personal attributes with past employers.

## **SUMMARY**

For the proper assessment of Merit, the following practices should be applied in the Recruitment & Selection process;

- ✓ All components of merit are essential and must be equally considered and weighed for a balanced and fair assessment.
- ✓ In the avoidance of bias and subjectivity, panel members must disclose any conflict of interest in the process or proceed to withdraw from the process when there is a direct or personal interest.
- ✓ The panel of assessors must always exercise sound judgment and collectively discuss, define and set the parameters of how each merit factor is to be assessed within the confines of the scope identified in this policy.
- ✓ The assessment of merit is to be comprehensively done based on all information gathered from the assessment tools and overall process.

- ✓ For transparency and accountability, document/record the whole process particularly how each applicant was comparatively assessed. Reporting also should not just be on the interview but an assessment of all information.
- ✓ The assessment of merit should be evidence-based. Any unaccounted incident that the selection panel may choose to include in the assessment of merit must be made known to the applicant. Natural justice in relation to a chance to be heard must be applied to minimize any bias in the assessment of merit.
- ✓ The assessment of merit must be done right from the outset. Any position to be processed under the Recruitment and Selection system must be thoroughly reviewed so that it reflects the relevant key roles, duties, responsibilities, competencies and descriptors that would support the organization's needs and priorities.

## **CONCLUSION**

Merit-based recruitment and selection is overall important to an organization in the pursuit of its goals. The assessment of merit, if not properly managed, creates unfavorable conditions for an organization especially, if applicants are internal employees. Communication and work relationships become tense and gradually impact on the morale of other work employees.

For decisions on recruitment and selection to be fair, impartial and transparent, the policy strategies and guidelines on merit-based assessments need to be well understood, applied and practiced by those who take part in the recruitment and selection of employees as well as those who have the authority to make decisions on appointments.

## **GLOSSARY OF TERMS:**

1. Merit Factors: requires that the merit of a person in relation to a position must be assessed on the basis of skills and abilities; educational qualifications; experience and past work performance; and personal attributes of the person that are relevant to the selection criteria for the position.
2. Job competencies or Job Standards: the basis for shortlisting, interview questioning, assessment, selection report and feedback. Also termed as job specifications, they are formulated from the four merit factors as per section 36 of the PS Act 2004.
3. Selection Panel or Panel of Assessors: nominated members or representatives to take part in the recruitment and selection for a position vacancy which normally comprise of an independent panel member who has knowledge of the position vacancy, the Human Resource Specialist and the Line Manager that the position reports to.
4. Assessment Tools: different methods used to evaluate, validate and confirm the claimed merits of applicants which include (but not limited to) tests and integrity checks.
5. Points System: a method of assessing, ranking and scoring the merits of applicants used in the SPS Recruitment & Selection process.
6. Formal qualification: a tertiary qualification attained from University and should be recognized, accredited or registered with a professional organization.
7. Vocational/Trade qualifications: a qualification focusing on hands-on specializations such as carpentry and plumbing.
8. Generic Trainings: Trainings intended to upgrade skills set that are usually required to enhance education, work and life in general. They can be designed in-house by an organisation's Human Resource branch or by registered learning providers. Generic trainings are important to continuously improve basic skills in the use of computers, managing time, change or improving report writing or communication skills.
9. Job Classification Process: The process of classifying and determining the salary value of a job.
10. Job Review or Job Analysis: The process of collecting facts about a job and analysing them to decide the purpose, nature and functions of a job and what duties and responsibilities are involved.
11. Applicants or Candidates: persons who have expressed interest in writing to an advertised job vacancy.
12. Job/Position Vacancy: an established position that is not occupied by a person and is processed under the Recruitment & Selection System.

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