

RECRUITING AND SELECTING STAFF IN THE EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS: MOVING THE SACRED COW OUT OF THE ROAD¹

Carolyn Ban

Graduate School of Public and International Affairs and European Union Center of
Excellence, University of Pittsburgh

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most important human resources functions in any organization is the process of recruiting and selecting² the right staff. How the organization defines “right” is crucial, and there are two very different perspectives on that question. On the one hand, a public management approach focuses on the ability of the selection method to identify people with the requisite technical knowledge, analytic capacity, and communication skills (among other qualities) necessary to succeed. On the other hand, the sociological and anthropological viewpoint stresses the fact that selection criteria and procedures are both products of and shapers of the organizational culture, reflecting what is valued within the organization and ensuring selection of new staff who fit into the organization and support its cultural values. This aspect of the selection process takes on even greater importance for a relatively new organization and one that is made up of people coming from a wide variety of cultural and professional backgrounds, such as the European Union and its constituent institutions. This paper examines the current selection processes and the proposed reforms from each of these perspectives and argues for the need to reach a synthesis of the two approaches.

Since the 1960s, the European institutions have relied on a process called the competition (often referred to using the French term, “*le concours*”) to recruit staff and to evaluate their qualifications for positions. When this paper was originally proposed for presentation at UACES, it had a somewhat different title and a specific hypothesis: that the competition process was technically flawed, but that there was no political will to change it,

that it was, in fact, a sacred cow, blocking the road but protected by a combination of formal staff regulations, custom and culture, and inertia. As the paper will make clear, that hypothesis was proved wrong, and we are, in fact, in the middle of what I term “moving the sacred cow out of the road,” i.e., of a dramatic process of change, one that will have far-reaching consequences for the future of the European institutions. This paper summarizes the critiques of the current system and provides an overview of the planned changes, looks at the change process, and examines the likely impact of the changes, from both the public management and the sociological perspectives.

THE HISTORY OF THE COMPETITION AND THE CREATION OF EPSO

The original models for much of the management system within the European institutions were the systems in place in the original six member states, and especially France (Stevens and Stevens, 1991), where use of formal written tests for entry to educational institutions as well as to public employment was wide-spread. For many years, each institution ran its own competition, not trusting the others to uphold the same standards or to share successful candidates equitably. Only when faced with the enormous challenge of hiring thousands of new staff as a result of the rapidly-approaching 2004 enlargement that would bring in 10 new member states, did the institutions finally agree to join forces and to create an independent organization that would conduct the competitions for all the European institutions. The European Personnel Selection Office (EPSO) was official established in 2002 and moved rapidly to organize competitions for officials from the new member states. EPSO staff came largely from the European Commission (EC) and also from the other institutions, and it adopted the existing model of the competition, with only incremental changes.

THE CURRENT COMPETITION PROCESS

The competition is a complex multi-stage process, and both the length of the process and the testing methods used have engendered criticisms.

1. Decision on schedule of competition

EPSO develops its annual workplan and schedule of upcoming competitions in consultation with all the European institutions that rely on its services, and that schedule is approved by its management board. For many fields, competitions are run only every three or four years, which means that those in academic programs preparing them for a career in the European institutions must often be willing to wait for years after their graduation for a chance to apply, by which time many will already have established themselves elsewhere and be less interested in moving. While Commission staff have pushed for more frequent competitions, EPSO has resisted, saying they have inadequate resources (interview with staff member from DG Admin, 2006). Since its creation, EPSO's focus has been on special competitions to bring in large numbers of staff from the new member states, but that period is drawing to a close, and the institutions will now return to the standard policy of competitions open to citizens of all member states and will be hiring mainly for replacements rather than bringing in large numbers of people.

2. Announcement of the examination and recruitment of applicants

The main method of recruiting applicants is passive; positions are posted on the EPSO website, and potential applicants are presumed to be both interested enough and knowledgeable enough to find them there. The need to recruit large numbers of new officials from the new member states did lead to more active outreach, with visits to those countries by EPSO staff and placement of ads in local newspapers. Announcements of upcoming competitions are also shared with the offices of permanent representation in each of the relevant member states, but the actual efforts undertaken by the new member states in disseminating this information were quite variable, and most of those efforts

focused on sharing the announcements with people already working in the national government (interviews conducted by the author with staff of the Offices of Permanent Representation and with government officials in six new member states, 2007).

The current concern is whether careers in the European institutions are sufficiently attractive, given the fact that entry-level rank and salary were lowered in 2004, at exactly the same time as the enlargement. Those committed to a career working on European issues may increasingly find other opportunities available within their national governments or with consulting firms, lobbyists, or NGOs. National governments are competing for top candidates through aggressive recruiting efforts, including working to improve the image of the government as an employer (NAPA, 2001). The Commission may increasingly find that an essentially passive recruitment strategy may continue to bring in large numbers of applicants, but not necessarily the best.

3. The preselection test

All those who register to participate in a competition take a standard multiple-choice examination, no matter the field in which they are applying. Since the process reflects the value of openness to all European citizens who apply, EPSO is sometimes confronted by thousands of applicants. For one major competition, for example, 40,000 people registered for the competition. So the preselection test is used primarily to eliminate as many people as possible in order to reduce the number of applicants to a manageable size (interviews with senior staff of EPSO, 2006-2007).

Earlier in its history, the content focused on general knowledge, and applicants were asked who wrote what opera and who won the Olympic medal in a certain sport. As in many national administrations,³ this type of testing was eventually seen as biased and not job-related, and in this case it was replaced by a test focusing on detailed factual knowledge of the European institutions, the treaties and laws governing them, history of the European institutions, personalities (such as the current Commissioners), and a host of

other detailed knowledge, some of it job-related (at least for some jobs) but much of it not. A more recent innovation was to add tests of verbal and numerical reasoning.

Delivery of the test has also changed over time. The traditional preselection test was a paper-and-pencil multiple-choice test, delivered at the same time in all the member states. The logistics challenges and attendant costs were enormous, as halls had to be rented, tests printed in multiple languages and delivered on time, and, of course, security had to be maintained. There were remarkably few breaches of security, but those that did take place were expensive, both in cost and in credibility. The tests had to be run with military precision. People were not allowed to leave the room, even to use the rest-rooms, particularly after an incident where people were found to be using portable phones to check answers. And, of course, if an applicant had to miss the test date because of illness or other problems, there was no way to make up the test. One simply had to wait until the next competition, which might not be for several years. Indeed, the process was so rigid and so off-putting that many who signed up for the test never actually appeared; in the competition mentioned above, 40,000 people registered, but only about 50% actually showed up and took the test (interview with EPSO senior staff member, 2007).

The move to computer-based testing was a significant technological change. Starting in 2006, preselection tests have been offered through testing centers in each member state, and individuals can make an appointment for a specific time. There have been some technical complaints about the system, including handicapped accessibility that was promised but not actually available or on-screen calculators to be used with the numerical reasoning test that did not function correctly (interviews with those taking the test in new member states, 2007), but this was clearly a move toward a more modern system that treated applicants in a more humane way. In fact, the number of people who failed to show up dropped dramatically.

4. **The review of qualifications**

Oddly, only after the applicant succeeds in the preselection test is there a formal review of qualifications, including review of the diploma and CV, to ensure that the person actually meets the formal educational requirements and years of experience needed to qualify for the position.

5. **The written examination**

From this point forward, the testing process is tailored more toward the specific field and is managed by a Selection Board, the members of which are “designated by the administrations of the Institutions and by the staff committees” (Van-Biesen, 2006: 7). That means that for each exam a new group of subject-matter specialists is appointed, and they start, more or less *de novo*, to design both the written test and the questions for the oral examinations. Typically, the written test combines multiple-choice and essays. The Selection Board may choose to use a bank of questions that EPSO maintains, but they have full responsibility for this test that focuses on the area of specialization, such as law, economics, accounting, or information technology. Pass rate for the written examination is typically roughly 50 percent. The essays, of course, have to be reviewed and graded individually, which is highly labor intensive, and, if there are large numbers of candidates, other staff in the institutions are recruited to assist the Selection Board in grading them.

6. **The oral exam**

Those who pass the written exam are brought to Brussels, at EPSO’s expense, for an oral interview conducted by the Selection Board (or, for large competitions, by a subset of its members). These interviews are typically 45 minutes in length, and the board members may conduct as many as eight in a day. When there are hundreds of applicants, this process is extremely long and expensive, and it puts an enormous burden on those who participate in the Selection Boards. Selection Boards may use standard questions, but they may also ask applicants to expand on what they wrote in their essays or to discuss the

topics they did not choose for the written exams. They are clearly looking at technical knowledge but also communication skills, personality, and motivation for a career in a European institution.

The effectiveness of the written and the oral examinations depends heavily on the quality of people who make up the Selection Boards and who agree to assist in grading the written exams, but they are, unfortunately, quite variable. Some very high-quality and dedicated staff volunteer or have their arm twisted to participate, but DGs have been known to encourage those who are seen as less than essential to do this, given the time away from the job it requires. And the current promotion system, which is based upon points (Ban, 2008), awards extra points for such service, again sometimes encouraging the less strong staff to volunteer.

7. The reserve list

One might think that surviving all those steps means that those who pass are now immediately placed in a position, but that is not at all the case. Those who succeed are merely placed on a list of “laureates,” which is posted on the EPSO website. Laureates are not ranked by score, but they are sometimes put into broad categories. For example, a current reserve list, for AD 5 (entry-level) lawyers, is divided into four merit groups, but laureates are not ranked within the groups and can be selected in any order. The reserve list “normally contains about twice as many candidates as the number of posts to be filled, a feature deriving from Belgian precedents” (Spence and Stevens, 2006:181). At this point, competition between the European institutions is played out. Specific institutions (especially the smaller institutions that fear they will lose out in direct competition with the Commission) can put a “flag” on a laureate, based upon a future projected hiring need, in which case, the other institutions (especially the Commission) cannot approach that person for a specified period of time, which in the past could be six months or longer but which is now three months. This step slows down the entire process and makes life difficult for

some candidates, who are not given a choice as to where to go, and who are not informed that they have been “flagged.”

Further, some laureates think that once they have passed the competition and are on the list, they have only to sit back and wait for the phone to ring and they will very shortly be working for a European institution. In fact, those in the know understand that there is no guarantee that they will ever be reached – they could languish on the list for several years before the list is rendered obsolete by a new competition. So those who are most motivated (and well-informed) understand that they need to take an active role at this point in sending their CV and expression of interest to those institutions, DGs, Directorates, or even specific units where they would most like to work. Since there is no public listing of actual vacancies, this process can have a ‘shot-in-the-dark’ element, requiring considerable effort and persistence on the part of applicants.

CRITIQUES OF THE COMPETITION PROCESS

The two most important criticisms of the current process relate to dissatisfaction with the quality of the people who appear on the reserve lists and to its deterrent effect on potential applicants.

Quality: the concept of test validity and the difficulty of applying it in the context of the competition

Within the United States, there has evolved a quite formal set of methods for evaluating the validity of a selection method, i.e., whether the test or other method accurately predicts excellence in performance on the job (Schmidt and Hunter, 1998). It requires, first, that the test be job-related, that is, that it test for the set of skills, competencies, or knowledge that are actually used in performance of the position. That is somewhat easier to determine in ‘rank in position’ systems, which hire for specific positions, but, even in hiring generalists, tests can be based on a careful analysis of the competencies that are shared by those who are deemed excellent in their performance. However, each of the three stages of the current competition reflects problems in test

quality, and each makes application of formal test validity measurement difficult or impossible.

On the one hand, the preselection test is standardized and developed by professional experts in test development. The verbal and numerical reasoning are the result of a job analysis process (Interview with staff person at EPSO, 2008). But the skills it tests are so basic that the preselection test is not designed to make fine-grained distinctions but merely to eliminate those who do not meet a relatively low threshold. The test of European knowledge does include some questions that are legitimate, at least for some positions. It is clearly more important, for example, for a future European lawyer to demonstrate knowledge of European law than it is for an information technology expert, but the same test is used for all, and many of the questions bear more resemblance to a “Trivial Pursuit” game. In fact, in conducting my research, I asked people who had recently gone through a competition to tell me what was the silliest question they had on the preselection test of European knowledge. In the “silly-easy” category, the top two were “What color is the European flag?” and “How many stars are on the European flag?” And in the silly-hard category, the hands-down winner was “What was the name of the first woman member of the European Parliament from the Green party?” (I have yet to discover anyone who knows the correct answer.) In all fairness, many of the questions do cover somewhat more job-relevant information, such as this sample question from the EPSO website:

In the common foreign and security policy, as laid down in the EU Treaty, the Commission:

- a) has no right of initiative
- b) has the sole right of initiative
- c) shares the right of initiative with the Member States
- d) shares the right of initiative with the European Parliament

When we move to the written and oral exam, we confront the problem that the Selection Board is comprised of amateurs, rather than people with expertise in test

development or in interviewing. And, as we saw above, the quality of each competition depends on the quality of this group. But one of the costs of using Selection Board members to develop tests is that they do not have either the time or the expertise to conduct systematic job analyses, and so they tend to generalize from their own personal experiences, which may or may not be representative.

Examinations of test validity can also use sophisticated statistical techniques, based on tracking those who are hired and comparing their performance on the entry examinations or other selection methods with their actual job performance (Shafritz et al, 2001) However, such a validation effort only makes sense if the structure of the examination remains largely consistent over time. There is no point in trying to track those hired as a result of a specific competition for lawyers, for example, if the following competitions are quite different because subsequent Selection Boards choose to take a different approach. So the lack of professionalism and consistency limits the applicability of formal test validation methodology.

False positives, false negatives, and sources of bias

Absent quantitative validation studies, we are left with anecdotal data. Extensive interviews within the European Commission⁴ provide a view from within the largest of the organizations that rely on EPSO for screening of job candidates. They shed light on three potential problems: what I term false positives, false negatives, and potential sources of bias within the system. False positives are the most visible, at least at the extremes. They are, simply, people who pass the series of tests and who appear on the list of laureates, but who are clearly not qualified. Heads of unit in DG Markt (Internal Market and Services) were the most outspoken of those I interviewed on this subject. As one told me,

I would say, frankly, that it is difficult to find officials of good quality, because -- it's completely understandable, but the people who pass the competition, the good ones are selected quickly and may even cause disputes between different unit. The less good ones, even if they passed the competition, in my case, I have seen candidates who don't meet the minimum standards that I require. So

sometimes I have had problems in filling positions, sometimes with positions remaining vacant for months and months, and that's not very effective.

In fact, some people languish on the reserve list and are never hired. More dangerous for the institution are those who are mediocre but who nonetheless succeed in getting a position. Given the fact that it is extremely difficult to dismiss an employee, even during the probationary period, the institutions may suffer the consequences of such a selection for many years. While no selection method can completely prevent false positives, one that is carefully designed based on the competencies needed for the job and that can also gauge interpersonal skills and motivation can greatly reduce their frequency.

False negatives, on the other hand, are harder to identify, but probably much more common. They are the people who would have been excellent officials but who did not make it through the test process. No one doubts that such people exist, but it is extremely hard to estimate how common the problem is or what the costs are to the organization. However, the recent enlargement gives us a kind of natural experiment. The purpose of a selection test is to find people who would excel on the job. Since it is normally too expensive and disruptive to put people into the job on a trial basis to see how they do, the test is, in theory, a proxy for the job. But in preparation for the 2004 enlargement and to smooth the transition, a large group of people were hired from the new member states under various temporary appointments without having to pass the concours initially. Many of them then went through the concours hoping to move into permanent positions. But their pass rate was quite low – in one DG only about 40% made it through the concours. If these people were already doing very well, then what does this say about the validity of the competition?

The response I got from several senior managers within EPSO when I raised that question was that, given the large number of candidates, false negatives don't matter. As one EPSO official put it:

I would say it's a pity, but on the other hand, the false negatives are less of a concern for us, because we have so many candidates, and at the end, when we see the list of laureates, most of them are very valid and very excellent candidates. So it is a pity for the services, where you have somebody who performs well. But again that's the constraints of the competition system. You have to go through this competition and make it with the others. So it is a pity, but it is not really very critical to the system.

I am certainly not proposing that temporary employees be converted to permanent status without going through a competition, as this risks abuse of the system. But the denial that false negatives are a problem is based on what I consider to be a flawed assumption: that all who pass the competition are interchangeable and are equality qualified, and thus the loss of very strong candidates or already experienced staff members is really not important. And it ignores the possibility that this high failure rate among those who had already demonstrated their competence might, in fact, be an indication that the selection methods themselves are flawed and might not test for all the qualities needed to succeed in the job.

Another issue raised by heads of unit as well as people who went through the competition process is that of bias. One of the risks of any selection system is that the choice of questions or methods can introduce bias. In the case of the European institutions, the key concerns are bias based on nationality, language, gender, or personal traits. One source of potential national bias is differential use of formal testing in the home country. It is clear that the entire competition process is one that is very familiar to those coming from the southern states, which is much less the case for those coming from the northern countries or the new member states, many of whom find the whole logic of the system strange. As a Dutch head of unit told me, "[It's] very French oriented. For them it's quite normal. In Holland once you've done your university degree, you don't do exams anymore. You get on, you do a good job, but you don't go and sit exams. In France you can sit exams until you're 73. It's part of the culture."

The nature of the test itself, especially of the preselection test, favors those who are what the French call *bêtes de concours*, literally test-taking animals, people able and willing to spend months of their lives memorizing details about the European institutions, as a staff member from a new member state explained:

I think the process is designed for students. So the whole process does not recognize the years of experience. Because I have a very good friend who works here for three years, but as a contractor, and she started as an auxiliary, before accession, because she was one of the best officers in our ministry working on EU issues. So she continued, and she didn't pass the test... It was one point difference. And I know for all the colleagues which are not very fast, it's impossible to read and do the test in the limits [of time]. And I think I did it because I was fast, because I am good in multiple choice tests. That's it.

The issue of language use for the competition is too complex to do more than touch on here, but for many years, applicants could take the written tests in any of the official languages. As the number of languages increased, and especially as the ten new member states entered at once, this became increasingly unworkable, and EPSO has moved to a system where written tests are offered only in the three working languages – English, French, and German – with the requirement that one take the test in a language other than one's native tongue, thus demonstrating knowledge of a second official language. Certainly, one of the challenges for many (and now for all) applicants is taking a test, in a stressful situation and under time pressure, in what is not your native language. One added wrinkle is that the applicant is required to write one part of the written exam in his or her native language as well as responding to some oral questions in that language. This is designed to identify people who claim European nationality based on parentage but who were, in fact, raised elsewhere.

The issue of gender bias has been raised periodically, both in terms of differential performance on the mathematical reasoning test but also in assessment by the Selection Board during the oral examinations. In an attempt to reduce gender bias, each Selection Board is required to have at least one woman. One such woman described to me the

stress this placed on her as the only woman on the Selection Board for a large competition. While the other members split up the task of the orals, she was expected to participate in all of them, which created great problems for her in trying to keep up with her regular work, and finally an additional woman was recruited to assist her by participating in some of the orals.

Finally, the fact that the Selection Boards are not staffed by professionals can introduce other sorts of bias, based on inappropriate criteria. This is a problem both in the grading of the written examinations and in the conduct of the oral examination. Grading of the written essay requires considerable judgment, but several officials (including some who have participated in the process) were very critical. As one explained:

The biggest problem I see is the *correction des épreuves de concours* [i.e., essays]. People who are looking at the written tests, in my view, need to be very carefully selected. In practice, DG Admin says we need volunteers, and all my experience has been that the weakest people, who cannot write a single sentence themselves, end up correcting the *épreuves de concours*. And it drives me up the wall. And that is I think how we end up having a huge amount of people pass the concours who, when they come to me to interview, I just think “Jesus Christ. That guy cannot say a logical sentence. How did he end up here?”

A head of unit who had, in fact, been a grader was also disgusted with the process, which he saw as actually punishing those who actually had substantive knowledge and thus opinions on the subject:

You are not looking for expertise. You are looking for someone who has the ability to write clearly and in a neutral way. So no political, judgmental, no. I mean you can write an essay with an introduction, two parts or three parts, and a conclusion. This is what you are asking, no more than that. They are not asking to have a knowledge of the policy you are talking about or economic issues...I mean I knew people who were very good, very solid background in economics, and they failed because they started criticizing the stability pact or -- no, not criticizing, but arguing, and say, questioning. You know nobody is asking you to raise questions. I mean you just have to present something very neutral, very light.

The criteria for success on the oral examination are even more problematic. One of the most outspoken critics of the process described why he would never participate again:

I sat on a jury once for oral exams, and I found it a pitiful experience. Because I had the head of the jury and three or four other colleagues, we get a CV, we have 30 seconds to prepare. How many points did this person get in the written exams? What should we look at? Who's going to ask a question? Let's move on and you'd have thirty seconds afterwards to say pass or fail. And I had a jury leader who said, "Well, she was very nervous and she was almost crying. I took pity on her. She reminded me of my niece. Let her pass through." If you already worked in the Commission, you were a *stagiaire* [intern], or you'd been employed, you had a 100% chance of passing your oral exam because this is already a colleague, so go through. A very strange experience. That's why once but never again.

I do not mean to imply that all written and oral examinations are biased or are evaluated based on inappropriate criteria. For example, I interviewed an attorney who had recently participated on a Selection Board and who was quite impressed by the seriousness with which her fellow Board members approached the process. The problem, however, is that there is always a risk of such bias, given the ad hoc composition of the boards and the minimal training they receive.

The deterrent effect: losing the best candidates?

Critics focusing on the potential deterrent effect make an argument based on current shortages of qualified candidates in some fields, such as IT and accounting, and on projected turnover and future hiring needs. They argue that, even though EPSO continues to attract thousands of applicants, the process turns off a significant number of really top applicants, who choose not to subject themselves to the process. The irregular schedule of competitions is, as we have seen above, one source of deterrence. The second is the length of the process, which still takes on average 15 months (European Commission, 2008a), plus months or even years to be selected from the reserve list. So a recent college graduate is unlikely to simply sit around and wait while going through the competition and is quite likely to find other employment in the meantime. In comparison, the hiring process for the U.S. government is criticized as too slow because it takes, on average, 102 days and, in extreme cases, can take six months from the time of application to receipt of a job offer (US Merit Systems Protection Board, 2006). And the third is the test itself, especially the preselection test, which requires months of study to memorize the facts

needed to pass the test of European knowledge. A whole small industry of test preparation courses and books has sprung up to help people through this process, but if one already has a very good job or excellent job prospects elsewhere, there is little incentive to put oneself through this ordeal. And, according to a recently-hired head of unit from a new member state, the net result is that some of the top people are, indeed, simply not applying:

Basically it does have a kind of contra-selecting capability as well, that it deters people who don't want to re-measure themselves. I know quite a number of people in quite a number of new member states. I've been working on this field for more than 12 years -- I know basically everybody, and I know that the best possible people to be recruited are still working for the new member states because simply they don't want to bother with this procedure. It takes way too long. There are so many possibilities to fall out. It doesn't give any kind of guarantee that your merits will be actually taken on board. And just because you are not filling out some mathematical calculations you could be even denied. Even though you were working on this project for years and years and years, and the most committed people would... basically I think half of them are deprived because of this system.

In sum, from a public management perspective, the competition as currently structured is not serving the needs of the European institutions or of prospective applicants, it is not ensuring a steady flow of excellent candidates, and the entire process of the competition is overdue for reform.

THE NEW, IMPROVED COMPETITION

The reforms proposed by EPSO are startling in their breadth. They reflect an understanding of the problems identified above with the current process and a willingness to take on the whole process, to rethink it, and to bring it into alignment with current best practice. The most important changes address three main goals: improving quality, reducing the deterrent effect, and meeting the needs of the European institutions.

Improve quality

EPSO is proposing to develop testing methods based on “a new core competences profile for the grade/role identified through job analysis” (European Commission, 2008: 2), i.e., an analysis of the competencies needed for success on the job. Instead of the

current three-stage testing process, there will be two stages. The first will be a series of computer-based tests, which will continue to include verbal and numeric reasoning but also additional tests in abstract reasoning, professional competencies, and possibly situational behavioral testing and linguistic tests. Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, the tests will vary depending on the specific competition. What will be eliminated from this phase is the famous (or infamous) test on European knowledge. The projected second phase will replace the traditional oral examination with a full-day assessment center, which will include a number of exercises testing a range of competencies such as analytic skills, effective communication, and ability to work with others. Because both phases of testing will be professionally developed and more standardized, studies of test validity and of the actual performance of those hired will be possible and will be useful in future revisions.

Reach out to good candidates and stop turning people off

The new competition process will be significantly shorter. Further, starting in 2010, EPSO will move to a regular annual cycle for the largest categories, administrators, linguists, and assistants/secretaries (EPSO, 2008), ensuring a steady stream of laureates and also making the timetable predictable for prospective candidates. And one proposed change would even allow students to take competitions in their last year of study, rather than waiting until they have their degree in hand and then waiting over a year to find out if they succeed in getting on a reserve list.

Planned changes making the reserve list process more transparent, by making it clear to laureates that it is appropriate for them to contact directly the institutions that interest them, and by informing them of the system of flags and letting them know if they have been flagged, may prevent loss of good candidates who feel they have fallen into a black hole and who give up and go elsewhere.

Recruitment may, however, remain an issue. EPSO plans a redesign of its website, certainly a good first step. EPSO already engages in some active outreach, but it is not

clear if that effort will be expanded or whether the individual institutions will play a more active role in encouraging outstanding candidates to apply.

Meet institutions' needs

The current process is not just unfriendly to possible applicants. It also fails to provide a steady stream of new officials to the institutions in a timely fashion. The briefing by David Bearfield for the Director Generals criticizes the past lack of strategic HR planning, which resulted in “only [an] ad-hoc reactive process when needs became acute” resulting in “peaks and troughs, leaving services with gaps” (EPSO, 2008: 4), a problem compounded by the extremely long time required to run a traditional competition. The new system will be linked, particularly within the European Commission, to a strategic human resources planning process, so that future needs can be anticipated.

In sum, the changes that are under way will, if they succeed, constitute a major reform, one that addresses many of the most serious technical problems with the current process. It is welcomed by many within the institutions, but, as we shall see, not by all.

POLITICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE COMPETITION

The discussion above of the problems with the current competition and of the proposed changes looks at recruitment and selection through a public management lens, with the focus on efficiency and on modern selection methods. But there is another lens through which one can view these processes, and it is a particularly important one for our understanding of the role that the competition plays in the context of the European institutions. First, in the early days of the precursors to the current EU, prior to the development of the competition, hiring was based on CVs and relied heavily on personal and national networks, leading to domination by a certain elite level and to the development of clientelist relationships within some parts of the organization (interviews with senior European Commission officials; Stevens and Stevens, 2001; Dimier,

forthcoming). The movement during the 1960s to a formal competition process embodied an important political value: that henceforth people would be hired based on a standard definition of merit rather than on nationality or contacts. That value is still deeply respected, and any change that would appear to open the system up to political bias (which, in the context of the EU means pressure from member states) would be strongly opposed.

A former senior official at EPSO made that point clearly:

Even if though we have appreciations coming from some countries—UK or Scandinavian countries—believing that this system is just hilarious...old fashioned Southern European bureaucracy... I just can't imagine how you would abandon the competition system and still be able to say the process is fair. There is no one in Italy or in Spain or in France who would back us up in changing the system away from open competition. They would all think that we were cheating all the time, and nepotism and cronyism and favoritism would be the main features. And the only way to avoid this is an open competition system.

From a sociological perspective, the competition also can be seen as playing a dual role, not only the technical function of screening candidates for positions but also an important function in the socialization of officials in the European institutions. In sociological or anthropological terms, the competition is a kind of initiation rite, what is called a rite of passage. Such rites mark the transition into a new status or into full membership in an organization, often by requiring the entrant to undergo some kind of ritual trial, which marks passage to a new status or membership in an elite organization (Haviland et al., 2008). In fact, the *concours* is described in French as an “*épreuve*” – a term that has the dual meaning of a test and a trial. In the case of the European institutions, to be one of the tribe you must go through this challenging process, and if you survive, then you are a “laureate” (literally, the winner – crowned by laurels) – a member of a very special elite. Those who have passed through this ordeal and succeeded are, of course, much more likely to see it as a valid method of assessment than those who failed. The latter see the process as arbitrary, as little more than a lottery, and are aware of the potential

for bias in the system. But, as a Dutch woman told me, “I see with a lot of people, they have criticized it, and then when they pass, they suddenly think it is wonderful.”

This trial by fire creates a strong esprit de corps. But it may also feed a sense of arrogance, a sense that we are clearly smarter than the people in the countries with whom we are dealing. Since even low-level desk officers are given a great deal of power to act independently, the confidence that comes with having passed through this ordeal may be useful, but to what extent does that sense of arrogance or superiority make relations more difficult and feed the negative image of the EU?

This gate-keeping function of the competition is apparent at several points in the process. First, as discussed above, some see the long, complex process and especially the test on European knowledge, as deterring highly qualified applicants who don't want to put themselves through the process. But supporters of the existing system would argue that it is, indirectly, a test of motivation, because only those who are strongly committed to working in the European institutions will be willing to spend months memorizing the factual material necessary for the preselection test and to go through such a long and uncertain process. The gate-keeping function is particularly apparent in the oral examinations. The process is designed to select people who will “fit in” and adjust to life within the Commission and other European institutions, but this is interpreted, in some cases, as a kind of elite reproduction process, in which those conducting the orals look for the qualities that they themselves share, and those who succeed are those who “fit the mold” and who will not make waves when they enter. In the case of applicants from the new member states, the pattern is clear; those who succeed not only speak multiple languages but have often had study or work experience abroad. Many have studied European law or policy or have worked on European policy issues in their home government, although the majority of those at entry level actually come from the private sector. Those who have too strong a national identity are less likely to succeed (Ban, 2007).

Viewed from a more positive perspective, the competition can be seen as a step in the socialization process leading to the supranational perspective that is a core value of the Commission, a ritual that plays a role in the broader process that Bellier describes as “a process of conversion whereby [European civil servants] ‘national being’ becomes a ‘European being’ (Bellier, 2000:150).

As I have described elsewhere (Ban, 2007), those coming from the new member states fear that the Selection Board is looking not just at their qualifications but at whether they are too outspoken or whether they wear the wrong clothes. While that fear may be exaggerated, the fact that the orals are conducted by subject matter specialists who receive only one day of training may increase the chances that at least subtle biases are introduced. A member of a recent Selection Board denied to me that there were such biases, but at the same time recounted a story of inappropriate comments (in this case, about women) by the chair. The danger here is not just that bias is unjust, but also that if the standards of conformity are too narrow, then the European institutions will lose the advantages gained from having a staff with diverse perspectives and experiences. Research shows that “heterogeneous groups are more likely than homogeneous groups to be creative and to reach high-quality decisions” (Jackson, 1992), and the staff of the European organizations are very heterogeneous, in language and in backgrounds, but bias may still hurt the chances of those who do not fit some Selection Board member’s sense of what is the appropriate background or style for a European official and thus overly limit group heterogeneity.

Without an understanding of this sociological perspective, I would have been puzzled by the mixed and even negative reactions I have already received from some current officials about these proposed changes. In particular, some argued that the test of European knowledge, while it overemphasized trivia, nonetheless forced people to learn about the history of the European institutions, their structures and roles, and (particularly

in combination with the oral examination) increased the odds that those hired had adequate knowledge but also had values that supported the European ideal.

Further, some of these critics viewed additional reforms through the perspective of their negative assessment of the major and controversial administrative reforms of the early 2000's, known as the Kinnock reforms (for discussions of the reform process and content, see Kassim, 2008; Bauer, 2007; Schön-Quinlivan, 2007; Stevens and Stevens, 2006; Ban, 2008) and through a specific view of the on-going conflict over the role of the EU itself. In simplified form, this is an argument about the division between those (individuals and countries) who are committed to further integration and those who see the EU as primarily an economic institution – an open market but certainly not an organization that should play a greater political role. In this view, it is particularly the British who are seen as arguing for the minimalist EU role, and it is also the British (in particular, Neil Kinnock and his cabinet) who pushed through administrative reform that was seen as reinforcing this limited EU role by clipping the wings of the Commission and of its managers (Bauer, 2008). Seen through that perspective, the proposed reform of the competition (led by the current head of EPSO, who served in Kinnock's cabinet) is more of the same, designed to weaken the commitment to building Europe, so that the people recruited will see working in the European institutions as just a job, interchangeable with working in any other organization, public or private. One of my contacts in the Commission (a person with extensive experience) expressed that fear most vividly, in an e-mail to me:

As you know, I am very much against this. It will facilitate the recruitment of smooth managerial type people as if were we a bank or a consulting company. (It will drastically diminish the recruitment of more critical people who want the Commission to be the active engine of the political integration process.) This has all very important ideological consequences. It is being presented as "better administration". In fact, it is simply pushing the London-agenda about the EU. Terrible.

Developing a New Model: Process and Challenges

The process of developing a model for change has actually been quite rapid and has moved simultaneously along two tracks. First, David Bearfield assumed the post of Director of EPSO in 2007. He had joined the European Commission in 1993, after a career in the British civil service, and had previously been a member of the cabinets of both Vice-President Kinnock and of Commissioner Kallas, and had also assistant to President Prodi's transition team, assistant to the Director-General for Personnel and Administration, and editor-in-chief of *Commission en Direct* (European Commission 2007), so he entered the position with considerable knowledge of the Commission and a history of participation in the Kinnock reform process. It is clear that arrived with the intention of making more than incremental or cosmetic changes.

The development of specific proposals moved quickly. Rather than relying heavily on outside consultants, the EPSO staff undertook a process of consultation and benchmarking, looking at best practice across the national governments of member states (and at least one non-member state), within parts of the United Nations as well as the World Bank, and in the private sector (Interviews with EPSO senior managers, 2008). It was important, for example, to look at the current reform process underway in France, particularly as France provided the original model for the competition (Desforges et Chalvron, 2008). This process led to development of a draft report that was presented to the EPSO Management Board (i.e., the DGs of Administration from each of the European institutions) in July, 2008. As of late July, that report is still being finalized and has not yet been made public.

At roughly the same time, the European Commission (by far the biggest stakeholder in EPSO) started its own process of reflection, as Secretary-General Catherine Day appointed three working groups, each to be chaired by someone external to DG Admin and EPSO. One group, chaired by Jurgen Holmquist, Director General of DG Markt

(Internal Market and Services), examined issues of motivation, a second, chaired by Robert Madelin, Director General of DG Sanco (Health and Consumers) focused on internal mobility and career development, and the third, chaired by Robert Verrue, DG of TAXUD (DG Taxation and Customs Union), addressed the issue of external recruitment. All three groups reported to the Secretary General in June. While these reports have not been made public, the staff unions have released to their members both the summary report that was provided to Directors General for their meeting in July as well as copies of the PowerPoint that David Bearfield used in briefings in the new plans for the competitions (for links to both, see SID, 2008).

At the point that I am writing this, the leadership of EPSO is quite optimistic that the process can continue to move quickly and that the first competitions under the new system can be run in two years. But organizational change is always challenging, and in this case, the leadership in EPSO is attempting to change a process that has been a deeply embedded part of the culture. The challenges are many, and they are technical, political, and cultural. If the tests are to be based on core competencies, as advertised, then, at least for the major fields, someone will need to conduct careful job analyses, then new tests will be prepared and presumably tested out, and the system for administering those tests will need to be designed and put into place. It is not yet clear exactly how each of those steps will be carried out. Will EPSO conduct the job analyses, or is this the function of the European institutions themselves? EPSO itself has no in-house capacity for test development, and thus plans to contract that out (as has been the case recently for such examinations as the verbal and numerical reasoning). In fact, even the capacity to select and oversee the work of these contractors is questionable. One response has been to bring in technical experts on secondment (as Detached National Experts, or DNEs) from the member states to aid in this process. But the stated timetable of two years will not be easy to achieve, even from a technical level, and EPSO cannot afford to let the quality of the

new tests slip in order to meet the self-imposed deadline. The challenge of quality control is exacerbated by the need to translate the test into three languages.

Implementation will also require an extensive effort at education aimed at a number of audiences. Current staff (especially managers) need to understand the new system, but so do prospective applicants as well as feeder organizations, including universities, national ministries, and other organizations that offer training courses for applicants. EPSO's planned redesign of its website is an essential first step, but there will need to be a much more active outreach to all these audiences.

Politically, the leadership of EPSO has been very successful in making the case for change to the representatives of its stakeholders, the Management Board. According to a consultant who has worked on the change process with EPSO leadership, board members understand that the current system is not meeting their needs, and they are quite dissatisfied with the service they receive. EPSO leadership will need to continue to involve them in the change process and to trust that their support will not waver. More importantly, the institutions themselves will need to be able to articulate clearly exactly what kinds of competencies they do want future hires to have. But for all the institutions, and especially for the European Commission (which employs 70 percent of the total staff of the European institutions), this will not necessarily be easy. As noted above, the "rank in person" employment system and requirements for rotation have led to an emphasis on generalist skills. And until recently, many staff did not even have job descriptions. So underlying these changes is the need for top management to think differently about how many people with what mix of skills they will need in future.

A further challenge is more cultural. The current structure of the competition is, as we have seen, deeply embedded in the organizational culture, and all the permanent staff have themselves gone through this "rite of passage." The call for change comes after several years of administrative reforms, including a new process for linking staff

evaluations with promotions, which is quite unpopular among the staff (Ban, 2008). Of course, the Commission staff is multicultural, coming from all the member states, but underlying that is a significant cultural division between northerners and southerners (Abélès, 2004). As we saw above, it is the southerners who are most familiar with systems similar to the traditional competition, and it is also the southerners who dominate the trade unions. Their response to this is likely to parallel their reactions to the Kinnock reforms, that this is a northern, or Anglo-Saxon plot to impose a British model on the Commission. There has been initial consultation with union representatives, and they are by no means uniformly opposed to the changes, according to one such person with whom I met. Nonetheless, selling the change to them in terms that they can accept will be a critical challenge.

A final area of challenge is one that may impact both quality and cultural acceptance of the new examination: the languages in which the written tests will be offered. The politics of language are complex within the European institutions, as in Europe as a whole (Castiglione and Longman, 2007; Leung and Jenkins, 2006; Ban, forthcoming). It has been a fundamental principle of the European Union that all the languages (at least all the majority languages) of the European countries are official languages of the EU, and the need to translate all official documents into what is now 23 official languages has necessitated building the largest translation service in the world. Within the European Commission, however, as noted above, there are three working languages, English, French, and German, and current policy requires everyone to be tested in one of the three languages, but not in their native language, thus in a sense evening the playing field and ensuring that everyone entered with knowledge of at least two European languages. EPSO is at least reopening that decision for examination, by conducting a feasibility study of offering the pre-selection test in all the 23 official languages.

EPSO's outreach plan is likely to include expanding the information available in all the languages, including the notice of competition and the static parts of their website. Further, specialist competitions that specify a language, such as for an English-language secretary, for example, will most likely be given in the language specified, so it will not be possible to compete for such a position while actually taking the test in a different language, all of which appears quite logical and feasible at reasonable cost. But the possible movement back to offering the pre-selection test in all the European languages would impose major costs and entail difficult technical challenges, as EPSO has developed banks of thousands of test questions that would have to be translated, with the attendant risk of mistranslation. Developing several new tests will be very challenging even without trying to translate them into 23 languages. And one might ask whether someone who could not succeed in the test in one of the working languages would be able to succeed on the job, which requires rapid work and clear communication in precisely one of those working languages.

THE NEW COMPETITION: WHAT WILL BE THE IMPACT?

It is probably presumptuous to try to predict the impact of all these changes, but it is perhaps useful to look forward in anticipation of potential pitfalls and to set a reasonable standard for success: these changes, important though they are, will neither solve all the problems of the European institutions nor destroy the European Commission as we know it. I focus on three questions: Will the reforms increase the attractiveness of employment in the European institutions? Will they improve the quality of staff? And what will be their impact on the socialization and values of those hired and on the cohesion of the organizations, especially the Commission?

It is likely that the new testing procedures, especially the shorter timetable and the elimination of the European knowledge section of the preselection test, will mean that fewer people are discouraged from applying just because the process is so onerous and so

opaque. And a better website will make it easier for applicants to get the information they need. But realistically these reforms are likely to have, at best, a marginal effect on the application rate. The overall view of the European Union and the appeal of working in the European institutions are more likely to be shaped by the level of knowledge of the EU, by the tone of press coverage and attendant negative stereotypes of “Eurocrats,” and by the current EU policy agenda.

It is clear that there has been a change from the early days of the institutions, when those who joined did so, in many cases, from a deep commitment to the building of Europe, with a sense of excitement and challenge and even of taking a risk by choosing to join. However, as Cini (1996; 68) notes, “Gradually... the visionaries were replaced by pragmatists.” As the founding generation has retired, the organization has entered a mature stage, where the structures have been established and many of the most difficult, and perhaps glamorous, challenges have already been accomplished. The call by Jacques Santer, former President of the Commission, for “doing less but doing it better” was hardly one to inspire idealists to join the Commission.

This raises the broader question of what motivates people to choose to work in the European institutions. Contrary to the popular preconception, people are not just attracted by the high salaries (although, of course, those matter). And also contrary to the widespread negative stereotype, based on my interviews within the Commission, those entering from the new member states are not clearly different or clearly more motivated by money than others who have joined recently. Many still come with idealistic motivations or because they perceive the job as challenging and interesting. Working in an international environment is seen by many as in itself a positive value. But also, as one might expect given the state of maturity of the European Union, many simply see this as a natural step, given that they chose some time ago to focus their studies on European law or European policy, with the intention of then joining the Commission or other European institution.

If the academic programs in European studies are, indeed, important feeder groups for employment in the European institutions, then investing in strong and attractive programs, especially in countries where future need is seen as greatest, may be the most logical way to increase future applicants. And if the real first step in recruiting for the European institutions is outreach and enrollment of students in these academic programs, then it may be important not only to communicate to the directors of this program how important their role is also but to look at the kinds of skills and knowledge these programs are imparting to make sure that they are aligned with the new competency-based approach and the new values.

This academic route is, however, most often the source of the generalist officials – lawyers, economists, or those in general administration, while the current recruitment problems are more commonly found in specialist areas, such as IT and accounting, where there is more direct competition with both national governments and the private sector. In these fields, in particular, a faster process, and one that is more tailored to the specific skills required, will be more effective, especially if coupled with a more active outreach and recruitment effort.

Can adopting the reforms proposed for the competition improve the quality of the staff? If the new tests are well designed and validated, they can, indeed, make a difference. But there are several important caveats here. First, no selection method is a perfect predictor of job performance, because many factors, such as ability to work with others and motivation, are difficult to test, even in job simulation tests such as assessment centers, but also because some people know how to give the right answers in interviews but turn out, on the job, to have a different personality or different values than they presented at the interview. So there will always be some level of false positives. Technically, the probationary period can be seen as the final step in selection, in which the person shows that he or she is actually capable of doing the job (US Merit Systems Protection Board,

2005). Thus, beyond testing, organizations need to have an effective mechanism for identifying marginal performers during the probationary period and removing them before they become permanent employees. That requires managers willing to face this responsibility and organizational support for managers who do so, but it is clear from my interviews that in the Commission such action is rarely taken, and those managers who attempt to remove poor performers during the probationary period feel stymied by the system.

Second, how one decides what are the key factors to measure and what are the standards of excellence is in part an objective exercise. One can test in a straight-forward way an applicant's knowledge and ability in a number of skill areas, such as translation, secretarial tasks, accounting, or information technology. But, as we have seen above, both test design and the criteria applied by juries reflect current job practice and the values held by current staff, and if those criteria are applied too narrowly, they may eliminate people who would bring creativity and innovation to the European institutions. From a sociological perspective, this process can be seen as an inevitable part of elite reproduction: Bourdieu states this most clearly:

Because there is no definition of technical competence per se...the technical competences that are required of members of the dominant group are in and of themselves of a nature as to justify their continued dominance: those who are dominant always tend to impose, as necessary and legitimate, the capacities that they have mastered and to include in the definition of excellence the practices in which they excel. (Bourdieu, 1989: 168. My translation)

One need not assume that this is a conscious effort to maintain dominance by an elite or to impose a kind of orthodoxy on new staff to understand this problem. A good example from the United States entails selection tests for police officers. At the same time that police forces were trying to diversify their staff, they encountered the problem that even on behaviorally-based exams, which looked at how the applicant would deal with a specific situation, the "right" answers were based on current practice by current officers,

almost all of whom were white and male, creating a more difficult hurdle for those who were “different.” Yet, once police forces began to diversify, they found that women actually were, on average, more successful than men in handling some situations because of a willingness to listen and to attempt to arbitrate, rather than moving quickly to action (Block and Anderson, 1974).

In raising the question of what standards will apply, then, we are at exactly the juncture between the issue of technical competence and that of values and of the cultural role of the competition. As we have seen, selection methods play a dual role, both technical and social, and it is precisely in attempting to agree on the qualities new recruits need to demonstrate that the two strands come together. If the social role is to continue to be important, then the new selection methods need to continue to ascertain or even to reinforce the values and culture that are central to the organization, in particular some knowledge of the European Union and a level of commitment to its goals, without focusing overly on details that have little bearing on needed job skills or knowledge. The current oral examination is often used to probe for motivation and commitment to organizational goals, and some current staff fear that this will be lost in the new assessment center. It is precisely the kind of fear that the reformers will need to address in selling the changes to the staff, to the managers who make hiring decisions, and to the unions. If all the firms hired to develop the tests are from northern countries and have experience primarily in the private sector, that will set off alarm bells for some.

In fact, the task of designing the new selection methods will require a delicate balancing act: developing specific written tests and exercises for the assessment centers based on a serious job analysis without imposing an overly rigid view of the needed qualifications based on current practice, and balancing the need for technical competence and job-related skills with the requirement that applicants demonstrate, at some point in the process, both needed knowledge of the European Union (such as EU law for lawyers,

EU policy processes for general administrators) and some level of commitment to EU ideals. These are both difficult challenges, and one can only hope that both EPSO and the firms it employs are talented at walking tight-ropes.

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² The terms "recruitment" and "selection" do not have consistent meanings across systems, so a word of clarification is in order. In this paper, I use recruitment to mean encouraging people to apply for positions within the European institutions. Selection, in this case, means going through the series of tests described below to reach the stage of being on a reserve list. Currently the final selection for a specific post is made by the manager within an individual directorate general or service.

³ France is one of the few countries still using tests of general culture. See Desforges and de Chalvron, 2008.

⁴ A total of 90 interviews were conducted in 2006 through 2008, primarily within three DGs within the Commission (DG Environment, DG Regional Policy, and DG Internal Market and Services), as well as within DG Personnel and Administration and EPSO. More information about the research can be found at <http://carolynban.net>.