

IMPROVING THE SELECTION PROCESS FOR THE CIVIL SERVICE IN QAZAQSTAN

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Received:
December 20, 2021

Revised:
January 17, 2022
February 21, 2022

Accepted:
February 28, 2022

DOI:
10.56289/ijcsrp.188

ABSTRACT

Currently, in Qazaqstan special attention is being paid to the professionalism of specialists entering the civil service. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to identify problematic issues in the selection procedures for the civil service and propose ways to solve them. The research methods used were the study of scientific papers using the method of information-targeted analysis, analysis of regulatory legal acts and questionnaires. The survey was conducted on the Google platform, based on voluntary sampling, and a total of 138 respondents answered the questions.

In the course of the study, the following issues were identified: the attractiveness of the civil service is generally low in local government bodies; the Human Resource Management Service is not engaged in the direct search for the necessary specialists but only performs the selection procedures established by law; there is a deficiency of skilled personnel able to professionally conduct an interview and analyse the significance of the results. As a result, in most cases, specialists employed in the civil service lack the skills to perform their work. Therefore, there is a need to introduce innovative and flexible approaches to the selection process for the civil service. One of them is the opening of a special web platform for selection for the civil service, the involvement in the selection committee of only those specialists who meet certain membership requirements, as well as the introduction of a competency matrix for HRM specialists participating in the selection.

Keywords: Human Resource Management, skilled personnel, state apparatus, civil service, civil servants, selection, professional selection, selection on a competitive basis.

INTRODUCTION

Civil servants are a direct driving force behind the successful implementation of reforms in the country and the execution of decisions aimed at improving people's living conditions.

For the first time, the goal of creating a highly efficient and professional apparatus was set in the 'Qazaqstan 2030' strategy in 1997 (Joldau, 1997). In line with this, in 1999, the regulatory framework for the selection process for civil service was established in the country, and a new wave of civil servants entered the system. However, in the 2012 'Qazaqstan 2050' strategy, the objectives were once again set to form a modern and effective corps of managers, and to significantly improve the civil service through enhanced methods of personnel selection and professional training (Joldau, 2012). Later, in the President's 2019 address, the focus was on attracting young professionals with specialised training to increase the efficiency of civil servants (Joldau, 2019), and in the 2020 address, the critical need for professionally skilled, forward-thinking, and proactive specialists was emphasised (Joldau, 2020).

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Thus, although a unique model of civil service has been established in Qazaqstan during the years of independence, and it has also been highly appraised by OECD experts (OECD, 2014; OECD, 2018), the repeated setting of tasks to form a professional civil service corps in strategic documents and guidelines is evidence that there are still unresolved issues in this field. The Concept of Public Administration Development, adopted this year, highlights a set of issues related to the 'non-competitive civil service', including the insufficient professional competence of a number of civil servants and the low level of the personnel selection and evaluation system (Jarlyq, 2021: 522).

Growing demands are strengthening the requirements for future civil servants. Therefore, there is a need to introduce innovative and flexible approaches to professional selection for civil service. This highlights the relevance of the topic of this article.

RESEARCH METHODS

In the course of the article preparation, scientific works were studied using the method of information-target analysis. Through the method of legal analysis, regulatory legal documents related to the selection of civil servants were carefully analysed. In addition, a survey was conducted to identify problematic issues in the selection of civil servants. In this context, the following research question was posed: how do the owners of different professions perceive and react to professional selection in the civil service?

The survey was prepared in the winter months of 2021 and was conducted online on the Google platform due to the coronavirus pandemic. A total of 138 respondents participated in the survey. Voluntary sampling was employed. The survey consisted of two parts: the first - information about the respondents, the second - assessment of the current selection of civil servants and collection of proposals for its improvement.

By gender, 62% of respondents were women, and 38% were men. As for age characteristics, 18-24 years old - 5.8%, 25-34 years old - 49.28%, 35-44 years old - 25.36%, 45-59 years old - 14.49%, and over 60 years old - 5.07%. As a result, the majority of those surveyed were 25-34 years old, accounting for 49.28% of the total number of participants.

As for the social status of respondents, among them were civil servants - 63.04%, civilians - 7.25%, military personnel - 2.9%, entrepreneurs - 6.52%, unemployed - 5.07%, self-employed - 6.52%, employees - 5.8%, pensioners - 2.9%.

Regarding the level of education of the respondents, 2.9% had a secondary education, 10.14% had specialised secondary education, and the vast majority (86.96%) had higher education (Bachelor's degree). Among those with higher education, 8.7% held a Master's degree and 0.72% held an advanced academic degree such as Candidate of Sciences, Doctor of Sciences, or PhD.

The majority of respondents have experience in participating in competitive selection in the civil service (72.46%). They indicated that they participated in competitive selection as a candidate, observer, selection committee member, chairman, etc.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In general, civil service selection systems are regulated by special legal acts (ACSH, 2016). Legal acts may either provide for uniform selection procedures or allow each state authority to conduct its own selection procedures (Van-Biesen, 2006). In the case of uniform procedures, selection may often be carried out in a centralised manner. This is typical for France, Spain,

and Greece. For example, in the United Kingdom and Lithuania, recruitment systems are decentralised (Ionnis and George, 2017).

A common feature for all countries is, firstly, the presence of a qualification selection (checking whether the candidate's formal qualifications meet the requirements); secondly, examinations (the forms of their conduct vary); thirdly, interviews. At the same time, the list of documents to be submitted, the terms and duration of the competitive procedures vary. Usually, position posts provide for signing an employment contract for a certain period, while career positions consider a lifetime employment (ACSH, 2016).

In spite of the growing labour force in the labour market, government agencies are experiencing difficulties in finding qualified specialists who are committed to serving the population. This is evidenced by a survey in the KPMG HR Pulse report for 2020. Government agencies are among the sectors with the greatest need for retraining (KPMG, 2021).

During the selection process, it is difficult to determine the professional and human potential of the applicant. And it is even more difficult to attract and retain a highly qualified applicant for the civil service. Hence, state bodies should introduce advanced technologies in Human Resource Management in the field of career planning, competency management, training and development, performance management, and leadership development (IPMA HR, 2017). This will undoubtedly increase the attractiveness of the public sector as an employer. Digitalisation, in turn, is opening up new recruitment tools for personnel selection. For example, the use of social networks to advertise vacancies, online tests and interviews are becoming standard procedures today.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

One of the priority tasks in Qazaqstan is the creation of a professional state apparatus. In this direction, a number of reforms were carried out regarding the selection of civil servants.

In accordance with current regulations, filling vacant administrative positions in state bodies is carried out on a competitive basis. The competition consists of assessing the professional level of candidates for vacant civil service positions and their compliance with the established qualification requirements for the position.

As practice shows, the following advantages of selection on a competitive basis can be noted:

- a) the competition ensures equal access for all citizens to civil service;
- b) it significantly reduces the likelihood of conflicts of interest in civil service.

At the same time, this procedure has its drawbacks.

Competitive selection is carried out in accordance with regulated procedures and selects candidates only from among those who have expressed a desire to participate in the competition. This procedure does not aim to search for and attract highly qualified specialists. As a result, first of all, in many cases, the level of competition for a single vacancy at the district or city level is very low. For example, in the Zhylyoi district of Atyrau region in 2021, the competition for one vacancy involved only 3 candidates (for the position of chief specialist, E-R-4 category - 3 candidates; for the position of department head, E-R-1 category - 1 candidate). This situation is also typical for other regions, as shown by various studies (Baimenov et al., 2020; Qaiyr, 2021).

Secondly, ultimately, the human resources department is not directly involved in searching for the specialists needed by their government agency. This was noted in a study conducted

this year on attracting talent to civil service (ACSH, 2022)

Thirdly, conducting a competitive selection process takes an average of 20 days, as a result of which the position may remain vacant for a month, potentially causing a halt in the workflow. If no suitable candidate is found during the selection process, the vacancy period may be extended even further, which ultimately reduces the efficiency of the government agency and negatively impacts the overall effectiveness of public administration.

According to the current legislation, the competition process includes several systematic stages: the publication of a vacancy announcement, the acceptance of documents from individuals wishing to participate, the verification of applicants' documents for compliance with established qualification requirements, an interview conducted with the participants by the selection panel of the government agency, and the final conclusion of the selection committee.

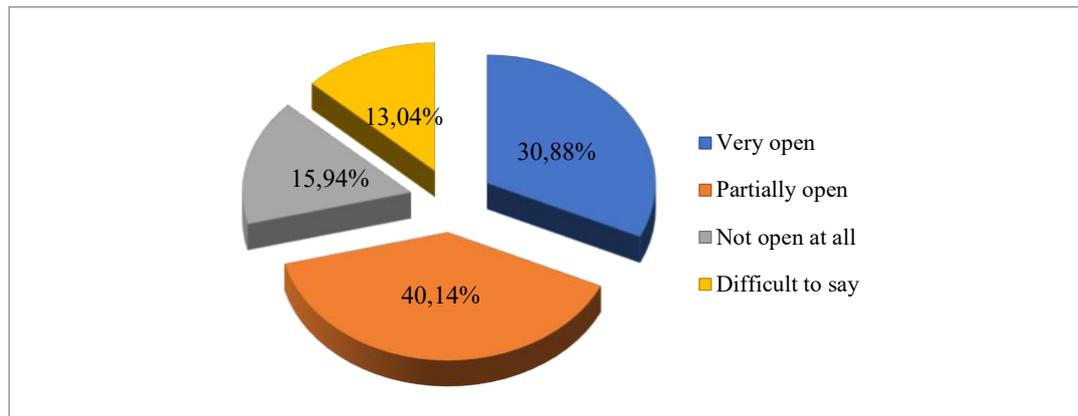
Thus, fourthly, the stages and their sequence are legally mandated, which in turn limits the flexibility of government agencies in the candidate selection process.

In this regard, fifthly, taking account of the specific nature of civil service positions, government agencies are unable to introduce additional stages that could help identify the most suitable candidate. Moreover, public institutions do not have the opportunity to involve external organisations (such as HR companies) in the competitive selection process. For this reason, we propose removing the legally mandated sequence of competition stages and instead regulating the competition procedure through rules established by the authorised body, allowing for greater flexibility taking account of the specific nature of the positions.

Sixth, the results of competency assessments cannot be considered fully reliable or valid. This is largely due to the shortage of qualified professionals within selection committees who are capable of conducting interviews at a professional level and interpreting their outcomes meaningfully. As a result, individuals recruited into the civil service often lack the necessary skills to perform their duties effectively. In this context, President Tokayev, in his address on January 11, 2022, highlighted the insufficient communication skills of civil servants. Furthermore, he stressed the importance of enhancing the civil service recruitment system, ensuring that hiring and promotion are based on merit, and making civil service accessible to every citizen of Qazaqstan (Tokayev, 2022).

Within this framework, the question 'In your opinion, is the current selection process for civil service positions sufficiently transparent?', posed to survey respondents revealed 40.14% of those indicated that the current recruitment process for civil service positions as only partially transparent, meanwhile, 15.94% considered the process to be entirely lacking transparency (see Figure 1). Respondents attributed these perceptions primarily to the alleged existence of prearranged agreements and the continued involvement of external influences in the personnel selection process.

Figure 1. Transparency of the civil service recruitment process, according to respondents.



The majority of survey respondents believe that the recruitment process for public service positions should be conducted either by independent agencies (41.18%) or by a specially designated governmental body with relevant specialisation (30.43%). This, in turn, reflects a degree of distrust toward state institutions in carrying out personnel selection functions. It is worth noting that similar practices are in place in several European countries.

The shortage of qualified professionals in the field of personnel selection presents a serious challenge for ensuring the recruitment of high-quality candidates within the civil service system. Before making a decision regarding a candidate's suitability for a vacant civil service position, it is essential to apply valid criteria and accurately interpret the results of relevant assessment methods. To enhance the effectiveness of the recruitment process, the involvement of experienced experts capable of providing objective and reliable evaluations is of critical importance.

Among the current risks associated with the selection of civil servants, respondents identified several key concerns: the adoption of biased decisions by the selection committee (57.3%), the provision of interview 'ready-made' questions to candidates in advance (77.5%), the inability to effectively assess candidates' required competencies for the vacant positions (49.4%), as well as the practice of preparing and inviting pre-selected 'targeted' candidates for specific administrative positions, often linked to team turnover. These findings indicate that the legacy of patronage and protective favouritism has not yet been fully eradicated from the recruitment system.

In the course of studying regulatory legal acts, it was revealed that there is no provision for accountability regarding the non-disclosure or distribution of interview questions and essay topics prepared by the selection committee.

In response to the question 'Are you aware that it is possible to attend sittings of the selection committee in state institutions as an observer?', 42.75% of respondents answered 'Yes', while 57.25% answered 'No.' This indicates that the majority of respondents (57.25%) are unaware of their right to participate in selection committee sittings as observers. According to current regulations, any citizen of the Republic of Qazaqstan aged 18 or older has the right to attend such meetings. This provision offers a valuable opportunity for individuals without prior experience in competitive selection processes to gain insight into how these procedures are conducted, develop relevant skills, and better prepare for future participation.

Further, in response to the follow-up question 'If you answered 'Yes,' how did you learn that it is possible to attend meetings of selection commissions in state bodies as an observer?', the

majority of respondents indicated that they had obtained this information through the official web-resources of governmental institutions. This suggests that respondents became aware of their right to participate as observers while reviewing vacancy announcements related to competitive selection processes.

According to the current regulations, announcements regarding competitive selection must be published on the official websites of state bodies and the authorised agency. Additionally, publication in print media, other internet platforms, and social networks is permitted. However, despite the widespread development of digital technologies, state institutions often do not utilise social media and widely accessed online platforms to disseminate information about upcoming competitions. As a result, many citizens remain unaware of their right to participate as observers. If citizens had the opportunity to experience attending selection commission sittings firsthand and witness the transparency of the process and the objectivity of the selection committee's decisions, public criticism of the recruitment process would likely decrease. Allowing state bodies to actively publish announcements on alternative internet platforms, particularly social media, could broaden the pool of potential candidates and improve the overall quality of competitive recruitment. At present, many countries have already adopted the practice of using social networks to advertise job vacancies and attract qualified professionals.

In response to the question 'In your opinion, does a member of the selection committee feel fully responsible for the decision they make based on the interview results?', 35.51% of respondents answered 'Yes, they feel responsible,' while 52.7% responded 'No, they do not feel responsible,' and 11.79% found it difficult to answer.

Under current regulations, selection committees are tasked with approving no more than ten thematic areas for interview questions and with assessing the professional and personal qualities of candidates for vacant administrative civil service positions. However, neither these regulations nor other normative legal acts contain provisions related to the approval process for interview questions, measures to prevent their prior disclosure to candidates, or safeguards addressing related corruption risks. As a result, it can be concluded that such regulatory gaps contribute to public skepticism regarding the integrity of competitive selection procedures and reinforce perceptions that the process lacks transparency.

CONCLUSION

Thus, the analysis of the existing legislation and the responses of survey participants reveal several key issues in the professional selection of civil servants:

- It is currently difficult to characterise the recruitment process for civil service as fully transparent;
- Many respondents are unaware of their right to attend selection commission meetings as observers;
- Risks associated with administrative civil service recruitment persist to this day;
- There is no defined responsibility for members of selection committees or human resources personnel regarding the preparation of interview questions or the safeguarding of their confidentiality.

In light of these challenges, several potential pathways for improving the current civil service recruitment system can be proposed.

1. Establishment of a Unified Web Platform to Enhance Transparency and Candidate Preparedness in Competitive Procedures

In order to improve the transparency and openness of competitive recruitment processes, we recommend the development of a unified web platform aimed at preparing potential candidates entering civil service. Currently, Qazaqstan lacks a centralised platform dedicated to assisting individuals in preparing for civil service recruitment. As a result, many applicants fail the required legal knowledge and personal qualities assessments due to insufficient access to preparatory resources.

Applicants are often unaware of the requirements for administrative civil service positions, as well as the structure of the testing and interview procedures. This lack of information contributes to the perception among many citizens that civil service is both unattractive and inaccessible.

To investigate this issue further, data were analysed from the 'National Center for Human Resource Management in Civil Service' JSC, which provided statistics on the number of individuals who successfully passed or failed the testing stage. Given the continued relevance of remote solutions in the post-2020 global pandemic context, the creation of such a platform remains a timely and necessary initiative. If we are to attract competent professionals to civil service, we must ensure that they are provided with adequate tools and opportunities to prepare effectively for recruitment procedures.

The platform should be equipped with all necessary resources, including testing programmes, instructional video materials, and information about current vacancies in administrative civil service positions. Furthermore, to ensure verification of individual user data, the platform must be integrated with governmental information systems.

Initially, candidates for administrative civil service positions would register on the platform by entering their personal data. As a second step, they would gain access to testing materials, detailed information on available vacancies, and the specific requirements for each position. This would provide candidates with opportunities to prepare for assessments and strengthen their competencies.

In the third and fourth stages, candidates would undergo practice testing on legal knowledge and competency-based assessments. Based on their results, they would then be eligible to participate in official competitions online and receive their results through the same platform.

2. According to the existing regulations, selection committees may include personnel management officers or those designated to fulfill these functions, employees of the agency announcing the vacancy, and other individuals appointed by the head of the organisation. However, in practice, little attention is paid to the qualifications and ethical standing of committee members. In some cases, individuals who have recently violated ethical norms or been subjected to disciplinary or administrative sanctions are appointed, as no clear eligibility standards are established. Furthermore, civil servants newly appointed to managerial positions, with no experience in competitive selection may also be appointed as members of the selection committee. In light of these challenges, we consider that selection committees must be professionalised by introducing the following mandatory eligibility requirements for members:

- Proven leadership experience in managerial positions within the state or private sector;
- Strong leadership competencies, including the ability to drive innovation and manage transformational change;

- Practical experience in recruitment and/or human resource management in either the state or private sector;
- Demonstrated adherence to ethical standards, with no recent record of disciplinary violations;
- Commitment to mastering and continuously improving selection procedures, including willingness to undertake regular training and certification;
- Strong interpersonal and communication skills, enabling effective collaboration across diverse stakeholder groups;
- Well-developed analytical thinking, including the ability to evaluate multiple perspectives and justify decisions based on evidence and sound judgment.

3. In the current context, the application of a competency-based approach in personnel selection processes within both the state and private sectors has become increasingly critical. Competency in the field of recruitment refers to the possession of specialised knowledge and domain-specific skills, cognitive strategies and a sense of accountability for own actions and decisions. To thrive in this new era, members of selection committees must possess a multidisciplinary profile characterised by a defined set of both soft and hard skills. The absence of these essential competencies may lead to significant challenges in professional performance and, more critically, to the selection of candidates who are fundamentally unfit for the position. Given these considerations, it is imperative to introduce a competency matrix for professionals involved in recruitment and selection processes.

4. Promoting civil sector careers among young professionals and preparing them for future recruitment processes. One of the most pressing challenges for university graduates is post-graduation employment. Many students remain uncertain about their future workplace until the final stages of their studies. Since civil service in state bodies is experiencing a certain shortage of personnel, we propose implementing structured internship programmes for young professionals within government agencies. The core objective of this proposal would not only alleviate staffing shortages but may also foster motivation of young professionals.

The following model is proposed: interns would participate in a one-year rotational internship programme, spending three months in each of several government bodies where vacancies are anticipated. The programme would target high-potential graduates from disciplines in high demand, such as Economics, Law, Public Administration, and other relevant professional fields. At the end of the internship, the host institution for full-time employment would be determined by a designated committee, taking account of the intern's performance evaluation results.

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