

## **How to Enhance the Role of Employing Agencies in the Selection of Newly Recruited Civil Servants: Perspectives from the Bottom**

Wan-Ling Huang\*, Evan Berman\*\*

### **Abstract**

This study explores the possibility of increasing the involvement of employing agencies in the selection process of new recruits, with a particular focus on the perspectives of these agencies. Through in-depth interviews with experienced public managers and current employees, we identify the strengths and weaknesses of the existing system and assess whether increased agency participation could improve the fit between selected recruits and agencies. Our findings show that while agencies value initial screening through pencil-and-paper tests, minimal involvement of agencies leads to misalignment in expectations between recruits and agencies. Enhancing agency involvement during the examination phase addresses some gaps but may introduce new challenges. We suggest redefining the civil service exam as an eligibility test and allowing agencies to make final decisions during the on-the-job training phase, where more candidates than positions would be evaluated.

Keyword: agency involvement, civil servant recruitment, eligibility tests, hiring decisions

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\* Professor, Department of Public Administration and Policy, National Taipei University

\*\* Professor, Department of Public Management, Fundação Getúlio Vargas / EAESP

## 如何強化用人機關於初任公務人員考選過程中的角色：基層的觀點

黃婉玲\*、埃文·伯曼\*\*

### 摘要

本研究旨在探討於初任公務人員考選過程中，強化用人機關參與的可能性，並從用人機關的角度切入來分析這個議題。透過訪談資深人事單位主管、業務單位主管與現職人員，本研究試圖了解現行制度的優劣，並分析在考試過程中鼓勵用人機關參與是否有其效用。研究結果發現，用人機關普遍認為只要制度提供他們「退貨機制」，由考選部透過紙筆測驗對應考者進行初步的資格篩選，是較為有效率的作法，且通過考試者的能力普遍不差。關於在考試階段納入口試並讓用人機關參與的想法，機關反而持保留態度，畢竟口試時間有限難以了解應考者全貌，且用人機關不見得具備專業的考試評鑑能力。用人機關真正能長時間觀察新人是否適任的機會，反而是在實務訓練階段。基此，本研究建議將現行公務人員國家考試定位為資格考而非任用考，並適度增加錄取人數，讓用人機關於訓練階段有汰除的空間。通過國家考試者，具備擔任公務人員的資格，但擁有資格並不保證會被任用。錄取者是否會被機關任用，取決於其在訓練階段的表現；通過實務訓練者，可於當年度被機關優先任用，未通過實務訓練者，待日後有機關開外補缺時，仍可自行遞件申請。輔以考選部與保訓會部分權責的調整，此種作法預期能讓用人機關在沒有顧慮的前提下，於訓練階段真正行使權力發揮選才功能。

關鍵詞：用人機關參與、公務人員選任、資格考試、聘用決定

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\*國立臺北大學公共行政暨政策學系教授

\*\*巴西聖保羅企業管理學院公共管理學系教授

## I. Introduction

In Taiwan, public sector recruitment has long focused on selecting the best and brightest through a centralized civil service exam. While this results in a pool of candidates whose cognitive capacity is generally satisfactory, concerns exist that other attributes and their work attitudes may not fit employing agencies' expectations. In response to these concerns, interest exists in reshaping the current process by redefining employing agencies' roles from passively accepting assigned recruits to actively selecting from a pool of potential candidates. However, how to implement this change remains a debated question, particularly given the lack of knowledge and insight from the perspective of agencies regarding such increased involvement.

When there are position vacancies, Taiwan's government agencies typically have three options for filling the roles: promoting qualified individuals internally (內陞), opening recruitment to individuals with eligibility (外補), or hiring through open recruitment based on examination results (考試分發). In both internal promotion and eligibility-based open recruitment, employing agencies not only have direct authority to make employment decisions but also can easily assess candidates' work performance, personality, and attitudes based on their previous records. However, exam-based open recruitment has become the only option for certain entry-level positions. Through this channel, employing agencies typically have limited opportunities to actively select candidates who align with their expectations, as employment decisions are primarily determined by test results.

The competitive examinations for newly recruited civil servants have historically been managed by the central agency known as the Examination Yuan. The exams are divided into three distinct levels: Elementary Examination, Junior Examination, and Senior Examination. These levels correspond to different roles and responsibilities within the civil service, with the complexity and scope of the exams increasing at each level. In addition to the vertical levels, the exams are further divided horizontally into various categories based on the specific tasks and responsibilities associated with different job roles. Although each exam category includes specific subjects tailored to its focus, most exams are conducted using pencil-and-paper formats, featuring either multiple-choice questions or essay questions, depending on the examination level. With

very few exceptions, other forms of assessment, such as interviews or scenario simulations, are rarely used in the process.

The individuals who pass the exams will be assigned to positions in agencies with reported openings, corresponding to the service categories of their examination. Before formal employment, they must complete several months of training,<sup>1</sup> which includes coursework provided by the National Academy of Civil Service (NACS), a division of the Civil Service Protection & Training Commission (CSPTC), to acquire essential public service knowledge. Additionally, they undergo on-the-job training within their assigned agencies to become familiar with their roles and responsibilities. For those without prior relevant experience, a six-month probation period is required after training before they can be officially appointed to the agency (合格實授). In this sense, the selection (recruitment) process for new civil servants consists of two phases: the centralized civil service examination and the subsequent training conducted by the CSPTC and employing agencies.

The recruitment system introduced above is unique in two aspects. First, the examination for civil service is not only a qualification exam but also an employment exam. Given that evaluations during the training process rarely have an impact, recruitment is almost entirely determined by pencil-and-paper test scores in most cases. Secondly, the examination process is dominated by the central agency, the Examination Yuan, while employing agencies have limited opportunities to participate in the process. Only a few exam categories or special exams, such as the Special Examination for Consular and Diplomatic Personnel, include representatives from the employing agencies as members of the interview committees. This results in employing agencies having no knowledge of who will be assigned to them, and candidates also being unaware of which agencies and specific positions they will serve in until the training stage.

These features of the above-mentioned double-blind selection process have led scholars to call for reform of the current system (Shih, 2022). Practitioners have also advocated for greater involvement of employing agencies in the examination process,

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<sup>1</sup> Different examination categories and certain special exams may have varying training periods, ranging from 4 months to 1 year.

such as proposing exam questions, grading exams, and participating in interviews through agency representatives (Liu, 2023). Some studies have reviewed the recruitment and selection systems for new recruits in other countries (Lu et al., 2015; Jiang & Li, 2022; Dong, 2023), offering potential insights into the possible roles of employing agencies during the process. In the US and UK, for instance, the selection process is highly decentralized, with agencies having full authority over recruitment decisions. In contrast, countries like South Korea rely on centralized written exams for hiring, while oral interviews provide room for agency-level involvement. However, the unique five-power constitutional framework in our context may limit the extent to which foreign systems can inform domestic policy learning. Moreover, reform efforts have been primarily driven by the Examination Yuan, while the perspectives of employing agencies on the ground have received relatively little attention.

Accordingly, this study aims to explore how employing agencies view the idea that greater involvement in the selection process could lead to better matches, provided that the principles of the five-power constitutional system are upheld. Three specific questions will be answered:

1. For employing agencies, what key aspects crucial for completion of tasks or work can't be effectively assessed through the current examination system? Are there any advantages to the current system beyond its limitations?
2. From the perspectives of employing agencies, would enhancing their involvement in the examination process improve the validity of personnel selection?
3. What suggestions can be made to increase the alignment between selected individuals and employing agencies?

## II. Literature Review

Theories in the field of human resource management shed light on the issue addressed here. Specifically, we focus on the concepts of person-environment fit and the psychological contract because these theoretical perspectives suggest the importance of alignment between employing organizations and their employees.

*Person-environment fit.* The primary issue with the lack of involvement of



employing agencies in the personnel selection process is the potential mismatch between the selected individual and their working environment. The importance of fit between person and environment (P-E fit) is emphasized by several theories. For instance, the theory of vocational choice proposed by Holland (1959) argues that individuals are more likely to be satisfied and successful in careers that align with their personality types. Dawis and Lofquist (1984) further proposed the theory of work adjustment arguing that individuals and their work environment would continue experiencing a dynamic process of achieving and maintaining compatibility. When individuals adjust to a status of correspondence, i.e. when their abilities (and preferences) align with the job demands (providing reinforcement), they tend to stay in the role and perform more effectively.

The concept of P-E fit encompasses a broad range of alignment types, including person-organization fit (P-O fit), person-group fit (P-G fit), and person-job fit (P-J fit) (Ostroff, 2012). Among these, P-O fit and P-J fit are particularly relevant to the issue of this study. Kristof (1996, pp. 4-5) defines P-O fit as “the compatibility between people and organizations that occur when: (a) at least one entity provides what the other needs, or (b) they share similar fundamental characteristics, or (c) both.” Based on Kristof's review, P-O fit in the literature can refer to four distinct types of alignment: One type emphasizes the similarity between individuals' attributes and the characteristics of the organization. Another focuses on goal congruence between individuals and organizational leaders or peers. A third type addresses the match between individuals' needs and the reinforcement or support provided by the organization. Lastly, P-O fit reflects the compatibility between individuals' personalities and the organization's climate.

The relevance of P-O fit to the recruitment and retention of organizational members was highlighted early in Schneider's (1987) Attraction-Selection-Attrition Model (ASA model). The model suggests that individuals are naturally attracted to organizations that share similar value systems. Similarly, organizations tend to recruit individuals whose goals and attributes align with those of current members, ensuring a high level of compatibility within the workforce. As this mutual selection process continues, organizations tend to become more homogeneous over time, driven by a focus on achieving P-O fit. This emphasis on fit leads to a scenario where individuals

who do not closely align with the organization's values and culture are more likely to experience difficulties adjusting and ultimately leave.

P-J fit refers to “the match between employees' knowledge, skills, and attributes and job demands” (Kristof-Brown, 2000, p. 643). Unlike P-O fit, which focuses on the congruence between personal characteristics and organizational attributes, P-J fit emphasizes how well an individual's abilities align with the specific requirements of the job. The lack of involvement of employing agencies during the recruitment process may lower P-O fit between selected individuals and organizations, or even lead to poor P-J fit. Although the P-O and P-J fit appear to be closely related, empirical research has demonstrated that they are distinct (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Lauver & Kristof-Brown, 2001).

Indeed, prior studies have highlighted that a lack of person-organization (P-O) fit or person-job (P-J) fit often leads to several negative outcomes, including decreased job satisfaction, lower organizational commitment, or higher turnover rates. Kristof-Brown et al. (2005) conducted a meta-analysis of 172 relevant studies published before 2004, examining distinctions among various types of P-E fit and their effects on outcomes. Their findings show that job and supervisor satisfaction were most strongly influenced by P-J fit, while P-O fit explained organizational commitment to a greater extent. By using data from 259 Chinese public employees, Liu et al. (2010) reported that higher perceived P-O fit was associated with greater job satisfaction and lower turnover intentions. Similarly, Farzaneh et al. (2014), in a survey of 500 employees from a gas transfer company, found that perceived P-O and P-J fit significantly and positively influenced employees' organizational commitment, which, in turn, affects organizational citizenship behavior. In their survey of 3,441 Taiwanese civil servants, Dong et al. (2021) also reported that the degree of match between individuals and their organizations, both “complementary fit” and “supplementary fit,” is a critical factor influencing job satisfaction.

Applying this theoretical perspective to the issues addressed in this paper, it is evident that a reform allowing for greater participation of employing agencies in our civil servant selection process is urgently needed. Given that the double-blind nature of the current civil servant recruitment system may lead to a disconnect, it is nearly impossible to expect that the selected candidates will be a good fit with the

organizations, whether in terms of organizational attributes or job characteristics. Moreover, since newly recruited individuals are required to remain within the same agencies (or their affiliated agencies) for at least 3 to 6 years, mismatches are likely to lead to undesirable outcomes for both individuals and organizations.

*Psychological contract.* P-O fit and P-J fit are not only relevant in employee selection but also crucial for the establishment and maintenance of the psychological contract between employees and employers once the selected candidates enter the organization. Sekiguchi (2007) argued that both P-O fit and P-J fit are beneficial for the establishment of the psychological contract. Specifically, P-J fit is particularly important for employees with a transactional psychological contract (characterized by clearly defined job roles), while P-O fit is more crucial for those with a relational psychological contract (featuring broad and flexible job requirements).

The concept of the psychological contract, first introduced by Rousseau (1995), is understood as “individual beliefs, shaped by the organization, regarding terms of an exchange agreement between individuals and their organization” (p. 25). This psychological contract (or, understanding) is unwritten and consist of promises and obligations that may be explicitly stated or implicitly understood through actions. Expanding on this concept, Rousseau et al. (2018) proposed a dynamic phase model describing how psychological contracts evolve over time. The model encompasses three phases—creation, maintenance, and renegotiation or repair—that individuals and organizations go through as they develop and manage mutual obligations and expectations. The creation phase typically unfolds during the initial months of employment, as newly recruited individuals enter the organization and begin their process of organizational socialization. During this period, if newcomers perceive alignment between the employer's promises and their expectations, the psychological contract is likely to stabilize, fostering trust and a sense of commitment. However, when disruptions or a perceived low P-O fit occur, breaches in the psychological contract may arise, leading some employees to leave the organization. For those who choose to stay, efforts are often made by both parties to revise existing obligations or negotiate new ones, aiming to restore balance and adapt to evolving expectations.

Prior studies have demonstrated the potential consequences of psychological contract breaches. In their study of a local authority in the southeast of Britain, Coyle-



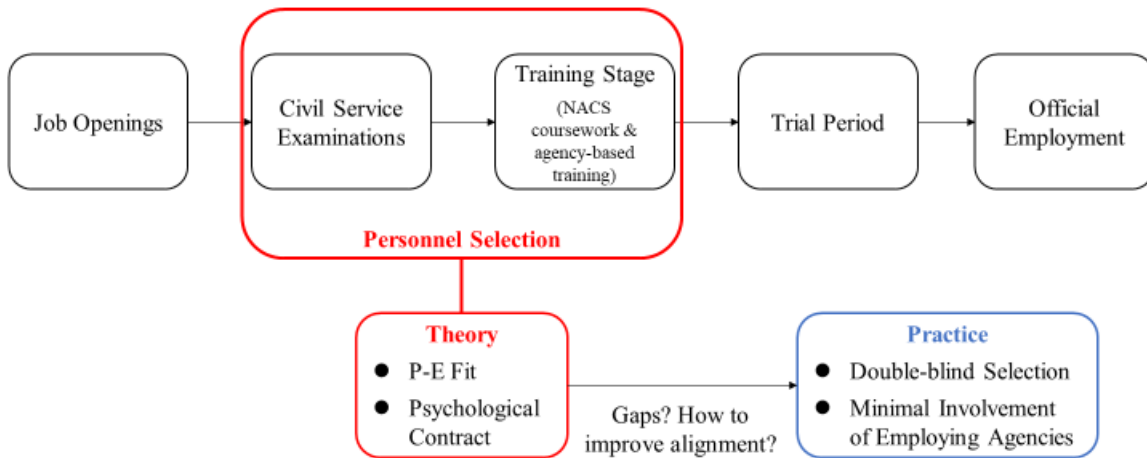
Shapiro and Kessler (2000) found that most employees reported experiencing a breakdown in their psychological contract. Furthermore, employees' perceptions of how well employers fulfilled their obligations were positively associated with their perceived organizational support, organizational commitment, and organizational citizenship behavior. Zhao et al. (2007) reviewed 51 empirical studies published before 2006 and concluded that breaches of psychological contracts can be regarded as affective events that may subsequently lead to negative attitudes and behaviors.

Berman and West (2003) argue that it is crucial to develop a psychological contract that strikes a reasonable balance between the expectations and contributions of both employers and employees, particularly during the joining-up process. Effective interviews with candidates or a probation period before formal employment may help align mutual expectations regarding roles and performance, thereby reducing misunderstandings that could lead to undesirable outcomes after hiring. Their empirical findings show that psychological contracts are widely used by managers in American local governments. Such use is also associated with increased openness and communication. However, the system currently adopted for recruiting civil servants in Taiwan appears to conflict with the approaches typically recommended by human resource management theories. To explore a more effective approach for selecting newcomers, the present study aims to examine the possibility of increasing the involvement of employing agencies in the selection process, with particular attention to the perspectives held by these agencies.

Based on the preceding discussion, the concepts of P-E fit and psychological contract theory underscore the importance of ensuring compatibility in key competencies, personal attributes, and mutual expectations between candidates and employing agencies during recruitment and selection. This study seeks to examine the extent to which the current civil service examination system facilitates this compatibility, and to explore how more direct involvement of employing agencies in the selection process may help bridge potential gaps between theory and practice. The research framework guiding this study is illustrated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Research Framework*



### III. Research Method

This study uses a small sample, qualitative approach. Qualitative research is appropriate when the need exists to clarify currently unclear or complex social phenomena, exploring subjects' lived experiences, including their understanding of contextual meanings, as well as to clarify essential linkages and strategic pathways for adaptation (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). Such is the case above where uncertainty exists about what employing agencies think of the current system and how they believe it should be reformed to improve the validity of personnel selection. By clarifying these matters, this study adds to knowledge by providing insights from the parties directly facing the problems and who have a high stake in the issue, thereby aiding policy and also future studies. Qualitative research often uses small samples, including in public administration, such as when interviewing elites, as its purpose is to gain in-depth understanding of subjects' lived experiences, insights, strategies and suggestions (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006).

#### *Research Subjects*

To gather insights from the ground level, we conducted in-depth interviews with four experienced, qualified, and carefully selected public managers and one current employee who had passed the Special Examination for Consular and Diplomatic Personnel. Among the four public managers, three are heads of personnel divisions in

central and local agencies, each with 15 to 30 years of experience in human resource management. The fourth is a mid-level manager of an operational division with extensive experience in conducting candidate interviews for eligibility-based open recruitment and providing on-the-job training for newly hired employees. These managers provided valuable perspectives on how employing agencies view proposals to enhance their involvement in the examination process.

We also interviewed an individual who had experiences participating in the Special Examination for Consular and Diplomatic Personnel and successfully completed the on-the-job training for diplomatic work. This choice was made because the special exam has relatively high participation from employing agencies. The fifth interviewee provided insights into the suitability of colleagues he has worked with and shed light on the advantages and potential costs of a highly participatory approach. The backgrounds of all interviewees and the interview details are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Backgrounds of Interviewees*

ID.	Affiliation	Sex	Position	Date and Duration
A1	Local agency	Female	Head of Personnel Division	Dec. 28, 2024 (1.5 hr)
A2	Central agency	Male	Head of Personnel Division	Dec. 31, 2024 (1.5 hr)
A3	Local agency	Male	Head of Personnel Division	Jan. 01 2025 (1.5 hr)
A4	Local agency	Female	Operational Division Mid-level manager	Jan. 05 2025 (2.5 hr)
B1	Central agency	Male	Diplomatic Personnel	Jan. 07 2025 (2 hr)

*Research Instruments*

We developed interview outlines for public managers and the current employee, respectively. For public managers, we are particularly interested in exploring pros and cons they perceive in the current examination system, as well as their views on increasing their participation in the examination process for new civil servants. The interview outlines include the following questions:

1. What are the main weaknesses of employees selected merely based on test scores, with minimal input from employing agencies?

2. To what extent do you think that the issues mentioned above can be addressed by enhancing the participation of employing agencies in the examination process? If you believe this is not the right solution, please explain why. If you think it could work, what strategies would you suggest for implementing this approach?
3. Interviews are common in eligibility-based open recruitment. According to your experience, how do the interviews typically proceed? Who is usually included in the interview committee? What specific aspects of applicants do you intend to assess through interviews? What questions do you typically ask to evaluate these aspects?
4. Based on your experience, do interviews in eligibility-based open recruitment provide an opportunity for both your agency and the applicants to better understand each other, including mutual expectations regarding the work? If so, in what ways?

The interview of the employee in diplomatic work focuses on describing and assessing the process of the Special Examination for Consular and Diplomatic Personnel. This interview brings an employee-centered perspective on the usefulness and perceived validity of high involvement selection processes. The interview outline includes the following questions:

1. According to your experience, what are the major challenges that newly recruited individuals in diplomatic work may encounter? Was there a significant gap between your expectations and the reality of the work?
2. Please describe the interview process of the special examination you took. What types of questions were you asked during the interview? To what extent did the interview help increase your understanding of the work or the agency that you were about to join?
3. Compared with other exam categories, the Special Examination for Consular and Diplomatic Personnel allows a relatively high level of participation by employing agencies in the examination process. In your view, does this approach help in finding a good match for the agency? Are there any weaknesses that you believe need improvement?

## IV. Findings

### *Pros and Cons of the Current Examination System*

#### A. Key Strengths

Although it has been widely criticized that the current selection system provides limited opportunities for employing agencies to choose the best candidates for their needs, the respondents have identified certain advantages of the selection system managed by a central examination agency. First of all, individuals recruited through pencil-and-paper tests generally demonstrate decent cognitive abilities, meaning they are well-equipped for abstract thinking, fast learning, and logical reasoning. As respondent A3 indicated:

Individuals who pass the national examination may initially lack experience in tasks such as drafting official documents. However, once you explain the tips to them, they quickly adapt and are able to meet the expectations of their supervisors....Regardless of whether they graduated from prestigious universities or less well-known institutions, I believe the fact that they passed the exam demonstrates their capability to a certain standard. Moreover, considering that our examination includes some specialized subjects, their overall performance is generally quite solid.

More importantly, talent selection is a specialized profession that requires expertise in human resource management, whether it involves designing pencil-and-paper tests or crafting interview questions. It is thus advantageous to delegate these tasks to the Examination Yuan because employing agencies may not all have necessary expertise in human resource selection. Respondent A1 particularly emphasized the importance of structured interviews, noting that without a well-designed framework (e.g., when each committee member independently asks questions without clear guidance) and experienced interviewers, interviews fail to add significant value to the selection process.

Another strength of a more centralized recruitment approach is its potential to



reduce administrative costs. If we seek to increase the involvement of employing agencies through methods such as interviews, the costs associated with manpower and venue space would need to be considered. Respondent A2 pointed out that,

In fact, the exams administered by the Ministry of Examination (a division of the Examination Yuan) are almost fully scheduled each year. Additionally, examination venues must be arranged in multiple locations across Taiwan, resulting in significantly high exam costs.

Worse yet, it also leads to another issue—pressure from interpersonal relationships—if we grant full selection power to employing agencies, similar to how it operates in eligibility-based open recruitment. Respondent A3 mentioned, “*When conducting eligibility-based open recruitment, the first step is to screen the candidates' qualifications. After that, those who are equipped will be notified for an interview. Based on my past experience, when the position is highly valued or when a candidate is eager to secure it, they may go to great lengths to exert influence or lobby.*” In other words, the current centralized approach actually helps alleviate the unavoidable pressures in selecting civil servants, ensuring a fairer and more qualification-based process.

## B. Notable Weaknesses

Despite its promise, the current examination system also faces several shortcomings. The individuals recruited primarily through pencil-and-paper tests may raise concerns regarding their work attitude, show a mismatch between their attributes and the agency's expectations, and experience an easy breakdown of the psychological contract, among other issues.

Questionable work attitudes were a key concern raised by most public managers during the interview. Some selected individuals did not demonstrate an active learning attitude during on-the-job training. Others may have been planning to wait for retirement from the very beginning, knowing that passing the examination guarantees them a permanent job protected by law. Additionally, some newly recruited individuals may request easier tasks or try to avoid more demanding or challenging assignments.

As respondent A4 shared, *“There was someone deployed to our agency who graduated from a prestigious university and possessed strong English skills, which were exactly what we needed. However, he refused to take on the tasks assigned to him, claiming that the workload was too heavy.”*

Lack of person-organization fit is another issue commonly encountered. Given that assessment methods other than pencil-and-paper tests are not adopted, except for some special examinations, individuals who lack the key attributes and abilities that employing agencies highly value may still be selected. Respondent A1 provided an example to illustrate this point. She worked in a local agency that primarily handles civil affairs, such as community services, where the workload is highly demanding and time-sensitive, with a fast pace. For such an agency, employees who possess a strong ability to adapt to changing circumstances and excel at teamwork are essential. However, some newly recruited individuals have struggled to adapt to the demands of fast-paced work.

In some cases, the recruit just can't get into the swing of things because he has been focused on memorizing for the (pencil-and-paper) tests. He might have eventually passed after several years of preparation, but once assigned to an agency—especially a local one like ours—he struggles to get into the flow of work. As soon as he falls behind, he starts to lose control, which eventually becomes a problem for our agency. (A1)

Some attributes of candidates are also difficult to assess solely through pencil-and-paper tests. For instance, while emotional stability and strong communication (social) skills are essential traits for individuals working in most government agencies, some newly selected individuals through open recruitment based on examinations tend to be neurotic or introverted, as observed by the respondents. This is likely because interviews are seldom used in civil service examinations, and candidates' personalities can't be fully revealed until they undertake on-the-job training. As indicated by respondent A4, *“Those who struggle with stress tolerance, are introverted, or lack interpersonal skills are likely to fail in private sector recruitment. Therefore, their family members might suggest that they pursue a public sector job, where no interview*

*is required.*” In other words, individuals whose personalities may not align with the agencies they work for are likely to self-select into the public sector.

The fact that the entire examination process for newly recruited civil servants offers limited opportunities for employing agencies and examinees to understand each other may likely lead to a breakdown of the psychological contract once the selected candidates enter the organization. It is thus not surprising that sometimes both parties are dissatisfied with each other, resulting in poor performance and an intention to leave. Respondent A3 expressed his experience:

He might have initially imagined the work to be easy and not too exhausting, only to later realize that the workload was heavy and filled with tedious tasks. If his supervisor failed to provide proper guidance, he might feel lost and directionless. Over time, the frustration builds up until it eventually erupts. Some choose to resign, while others may try to transfer to a different position in another agency.

The process of eligibility-based open recruitment, where the employing agency has full involvement and decision-making authority, tells a different story. In addition to assessing the abilities and key attributes of applicants, many agencies use recruitment interviews as an opportunity to establish a mutual understanding of work expectations between the applicants and the agency. Respondent A1 mentioned, *“I usually ask, ‘Do you have any plans for your career?’ Some people might say, ‘I came here to gain experience and create opportunities for promotion in the future.’ For individuals whose hometowns are located in the southern region, I may ask if they plan to return there for work in the future. Questions like these help us assess how long they are likely to stay in our agency.”* The respondent's feedback aligns with Berman and West's (2003) suggestion that the joining-up stage is an ideal time to establish psychological contracts based on realistic expectations between employees and employers, helping to prevent frustration at a later stage.

In summary, individuals selected through the current examination system generally demonstrate strong cognitive abilities. Moreover, managing the examination through a central agency could be a more effective and cost-efficient approach for the initial

screening. After all, examination and selection are specialized tasks that not all employing agencies are adequately equipped to handle. More importantly, a more centralized selection process may act as a buffer for employing agencies against potential pressures from interpersonal relationships, which could arise if recruitment decisions were entirely in the hands of these agencies.

However, several weaknesses remain from the perspective of employing agencies. The most significant issue is that work attitudes cannot be effectively assessed when recruitment relies solely on pencil-and-paper tests. As a result, individuals who are inactive or indifferent at work may still be recruited. Additionally, the selected candidates may lack the key attributes that employing agencies value, leading to a poor P-O fit. The minimal involvement of employing agencies also leads to a lack of alignment between recruits and agencies in terms of mutual understanding and expectations regarding the job. This misalignment increases the likelihood of psychological contract breakdowns at a later stage, potentially leading to job dissatisfaction, poor performance, and even turnover intentions.

### *Agency Involvement in the Examination Stage May Not Address All the Issues*

Considering these weaknesses, there have been calls to increase employing agencies' involvement in the examination process, particularly through interviews. However, the key question remains whether this increased involvement can tackle the issues discussed above. If these problems cannot be solved by more agency participation, such a reform may create new problems while leaving the existing ones intact. Surprisingly, the respondents we interviewed are generally more skeptical about the effectiveness of agency involvement in the examination stage.

First of all, poor work attitudes and low P-O fit mainly arise from the fact that most examination categories rely solely on pencil-and-paper tests, which are limited in identifying attitudes and personal attributes beyond cognitive abilities. Most respondents agreed that adding interviews after the pencil-and-paper tests could partially address the problem, but emphasized that it would not resolve all the issues. After all, interviews, as an assessment tool, also have their limitations and may face challenges related to scorer reliability (Yu, 2023). It is unrealistic to expect that work attitudes and all the key attributes valued by employing agencies can be fully assessed

within the limited time of an interview. Therefore, whether interviews should be widely adopted for most examination categories should be considered in terms of both costs and benefits. It is not a solution that comes with only benefits and no costs. Respondent A2 pointed out that,

Interview committees typically consist of three or four members, with a representative from employing agencies making up only a quarter or a third of the panel, limiting their influence. Additionally, interviews may sometimes fail to achieve their intended purpose. While you may think you're asking a well-structured question, the interviewee may not always address it directly.... Observation is crucial, but interviewers may not have enough time to fully observe candidates due to the limited duration of the interview.

Moreover, the effectiveness of interviews also depends on the level of structure in the interview process and the experience of the interviewers. From the perspective of employing agencies, interviews managed by the Ministry of Examination (MOEX) may be more appropriate if the goal is to identify attributes relevant to most agencies. In this case, including experts on talent selection would be more relevant than involving employing agencies directly. A rather typical

What I've just mentioned are all core competencies relevant to any agency. You can design interview questions to assess these competencies accordingly or use videos for situational tests. The evaluators can be university professors, as they don't need to assess professional skills related to specific agencies. Instead, they focus on evaluating general competencies, such as enthusiasm, crisis management, and teamwork abilities, etc. Why involve local agencies? There's no need! (A1)

However, if the aim is to assess specific skills or attributes important to particular types of agencies, interviews could be incorporated with greater involvement from employing agencies after the pencil-and-paper tests, as is currently done for certain special examinations such as Hakka affairs and diplomatic personnel, etc. For instance, individuals who engage in diplomatic work require strong language abilities and



networking skills. As a result, the special examination for diplomatic personnel consists of two stages: pencil-and-paper tests and subsequent interviews. The interviews, involving an agency representative, are conducted twice, once in English and once in Chinese, to assess language proficiency, communication skills, and responsiveness. Those who pass the exam are generally well-qualified for diplomatic work. As respondent B1 observed, *“How could you not be capable of performing these tasks once you've already passed the Special Examination (for Consular and Diplomatic Personnel)? Each exam passer is undoubtedly equipped with skills for both networking with external parties and handling administrative tasks.”*

Of course, involvement of employing agencies in the examination process does not come without risks. Interestingly, the respondent with experience in diplomatic work raised concerns about the fairness of the interview process:<sup>2</sup>

The appointment of examiners is the main issue. During the interview, it quickly becomes apparent which examinees are their students and which are not....Some examiners even serve as instructors for intensive preparatory courses for the Special Examination for Consular and Diplomatic Personnel offered by XXX (an academic institution)....Additionally, there is a cram school that provides targeted training for this examination. If you attend their classes, you'll likely know what may be asked in the interview. (B1)

Regarding the frequent breakdown of the psychological contract, the respondents argued that the issue would be difficult to resolve unless the examination process is fully decentralized—where each agency conducts its own recruitment and selection for all vacant positions, similar to how they handle the eligibility-based open recruitment. Under the current system, individuals who pass the examination for a specific category may be assigned to various agencies that provide related services. For instance, those who pass the Examination for Hakka Affairs Administration may be allocated to the

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that the quotation reflects the interviewee's personal perception and may not align with objective facts. To ensure fairness and integrity in the examination process, the MOEX requires all committee members to sign a written agreement confirming that they do not teach any courses or have any affiliations with cram schools. They are also obligated to maintain the confidentiality of all matters related to the examinations in which they are involved.

Hakka Affairs Council or to units responsible for Hakka affairs within different local governments. Alignment of mutual expectations becomes challenging because not all agencies can have representatives involved in the examination process each year.

Even for the Special Examination for Consular and Diplomatic Personnel, where successful candidates are primarily assigned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) or its affiliated agencies, the interviews mainly focus on assessing language skills and other abilities. As a result, the selected individuals gain little understanding of the job's content or the agency's culture until they reach the training stage.<sup>3</sup> As shared by respondent B1, *“While training at the Institute of Diplomacy and International Affairs, representatives from various divisions deliver briefings about their work and allow us to ask questions freely. The next day, they simulate a scenario where we are assigned to a specific division, requiring us to present on its responsibilities and tasks. The audience may ask follow-up questions.”*

In sum, increasing the involvement of employing agencies in the examination process may offer limited benefits under the current centralized approach. While their participation might partially address some issues, long-term interaction is often more important for agencies to effectively assess an individual's work attitudes, attributes, and abilities. Therefore, greater agency involvement might be more impactful during the on-the-job training stage, a topic that will be explored in more detail in the next section.

### *On-the-job Training Could Offer a Better Way to Evaluate Candidates*

Based on the discussion above, involving employing agencies during the examination phase may help little to address the mismatch or breakdown of the psychological contract between recruited individuals and employing agencies. So, what might be a better solution from the perspective of employing agencies? Most respondents indicated that the best chance to assess individuals' work attitudes and attributes is during the on-the-job training phase, not through the examination. During

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<sup>3</sup> Selected individuals who pass the Special Examination for Consular and Diplomatic Personnel are required to undergo six months of training. They will attend courses organized by the Institute of Diplomacy and International Affairs, MOFA, for four months. During the remaining two months, they will participate in on-the-job training, spending one month each in support divisions and operational divisions.

this phase, candidates are directly involved in tasks and experience the organizational culture. At the same time, the agency can evaluate the candidate's work attitudes, attributes and abilities in a real-world setting. As respondent A4 recalled:

We have encountered situations where applicants performed excellently during the interview, only to reveal hidden issues once they started working....Some individuals with mental health challenges may seem perfectly normal most of the time, yet they are likely to break down under high work pressure....Interviews or other test methods during the examination stage offer little help in discovering how someone will handle pressure on the job....These issues typically become apparent during the on-the-job training stage.

Accordingly, on-the-job training could serve a bridge to fill the gap between theory and current practice mentioned earlier. It offers a crucial opportunity for both candidates and employing agencies to reveal what they can truly contribute to each other. Moreover, it allows employing agencies to find a better match if unqualified candidates can be ruled out during the process.

Although this approach is similar to the probation periods used by many private companies, where newly hired employees are closely evaluated, the on-the-job training we discussed here is not something that occurs after employment, but is part of the civil servant selection (recruitment) process in our current system. As discussed in the introduction section, individuals intending to become civil servants must first pass a national civil service examination, which typically consists of pencil-and-paper tests. After passing the examination, candidates must successfully complete training in order to gain civil service eligibility and simultaneously secure a position. In other words, the on-the-job training is an integral component of the selection process, although it is separate from the examination and managed by the CSPTC. By law, those who fail to complete the training will not receive eligibility and will not be employed.

Accordingly, the current system has already provided an opportunity for employing agencies to get involved and align their expectations with the candidates, though this occurs at a later period of the selection (recruitment) process rather than

during the examination stage. In practice, however, very few exam passers fail to complete the training, suggesting that employing agencies may have not fully exercised their authority to dismiss unqualified candidates based on their own criteria. According to the statistics reported by the CSPTC, only 17 out of 46,150 exam passers failed the training over the past ten years.<sup>4</sup> During the interview, the respondents also explained the reasons for their reluctance to fail the candidates.

First, the civil service examination is designed not only to determine eligibility but also to serve as a test for employment. Each year, individuals who pass the exam are guaranteed a position in an agency. Therefore, candidates who pass the exam but fail the training may file a lawsuit to protect their job rights. In such cases, the agency that fails the candidate faces significant pressure and must deal with tedious paperwork. Even if the individual does not file a lawsuit, the agency will still be closely monitored by the CSPTC to ensure that the rights of exam passers are properly protected. The agency will first be asked to attempt reassignment of the disqualified individual to a position in a different division within the agency. If this is not possible, the agency must prepare extensive evidence to justify the decision to fail the candidate. While it is the CSPTC's duty to ensure fairness and protect the rights of exam passers, this process is costly for the employing agency. As a result, employing agencies often opt to pass all candidates to avoid these complications. As experienced by respondent A4,

Once you decide to fail an unsuitable candidate, the CSPTC will become involved. In addition to interviewing the candidate for future records, we also have to spend time responding to the “guidance” of the CSPTC, such as trying to find a position in another division for this person or making other adjustments. This leaves us with no time to address the tasks and responsibilities that our agency is supposed to handle on a regular basis.

Moreover, sometimes agency managers may be reluctant to take a firm stand or have tendency to avoid confrontation. After all, failing the training not only means that the candidate will not be able to receive civil service eligibility, but also means that he/she can't secure a job. As indicated by respondent A3, *“In our society, there is often*

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.csptc.gov.tw/News\\_Content.aspx?n=4450&s=41698](https://www.csptc.gov.tw/News_Content.aspx?n=4450&s=41698)

*a greater emphasis on personal feelings (人情) than strictly adhering to rules. The head of the agency might believe that the candidate is still adjusting and that things will improve with time. He/She may encourage the supervisor of the specific division to give the candidate a chance. Even if the supervisor initially plans to fail the candidate, he/she may ultimately decide to let the candidate stay.”*

Third, some agencies are severely understaffed, and if exam passers assigned to these agencies fail the training, the positions will remain vacant. This issue is particularly pronounced in examination categories related to civil engineering, public health, and social welfare because industries in these fields offer more attractive salaries and benefits, resulting in fewer applicants than the agencies require. For these agencies, recruiting a less qualified individual may be preferable to leaving the position unfilled, unless the candidate has significant issues that the agency cannot address. In such circumstances, it is unlikely that employing agencies will actively filter out candidates who are not fully qualified or perfectly suited to their needs.

## **V. Discussion: Separating Eligibility Assessment from Employment Decision as a Possible Solution**

The present study aims to explore employing agencies' perspectives on current recruitment and selection processes for new hires, and to propose potential solutions to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Guided by the concepts of P-E fit and psychological contract theory, our interviews reveal that relying solely on pencil-and-paper tests likely leads to poor candidate-agency fit and increases the risk of psychological contract breakdown in later stages. However, most interviewees believe that involving employing agencies in the examination process may offer minimal improvements. Instead, on-the-job training provides a more effective platform for the agencies to exercise their selection power.

Although current laws grant employing agencies the authority to filter out disqualified individuals during the training stage, which could be used to enhance P-O and P-J fit, very few candidates are actually rejected due to various considerations. To enhance the system's effectiveness, it is essential to design mechanisms that incentivize employing agencies to reject candidates deemed unsuitable, while minimizing the associated costs for the agencies.



We propose redefining the national civil service examination as a test of eligibility rather than direct employment, which could offer a possible solution. The mission of the examination, managed by the MOEX, should be to identify individuals with the cognitive abilities and core competencies required for government roles, regardless of the specific agency they may work for. These abilities can be assessed through pencil-and-paper tests or other methods, such as interviews, where the involvement of employing agencies may not be necessary. Passing the civil service examination would grant candidates eligibility to become civil servants, but employment would not be guaranteed, as individual agencies may prioritize other attributes specific to their needs. For eligible candidates interested in a position offered by an agency, competition among them would be a reasonable and fair process.

There are numerous government agencies in the public sector, and each may have its own specific requirements for new recruits. It is unreasonable to expect that a civil service examination, managed by a central agency, can provide a one-size-fits-all solution. Furthermore, individuals who excel at taking exams may not necessarily possess the practical work abilities required. Only the employing agencies have the capacity to assess whether individuals are suitable for their roles, particularly when given a period to closely observe them. Interviews or other assessment methods, beyond pencil-and-paper tests, during the examination phase may be somewhat helpful, while it is important to balance examination costs to maintain efficiency.

Accordingly, whether an individual who has received eligibility is ultimately employed should be a decision made by the employing agencies, where the candidate undergoes on-the-job training. We propose a system in which, each year, employing agencies will be assigned a somewhat larger number of candidates than the positions available for fulfillment, selected from among those who pass the civil service examination. The selected individuals would undergo on-the-job training provided by the agencies, and candidates would be evaluated throughout the process. Only the top candidates who meet the agency's expectations will be ultimately employed.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The specific multiplier, determining how many candidates will be eligible for training, can be open to discussion, considering political and administrative feasibility. Let's assume that a multiplier of 1.2 is the final number agreed upon. If an agency requests five employees this year, then six candidates who pass the exam will be assigned to the agency. Only the top five candidates, determined by their performance during the on-the-job training, will stay. If the agency finds that only four out of six

Candidates who are not selected this year retain their civil service eligibility and can later apply for positions released through eligibility-based open recruitment, as is currently the case in the system.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, a similar idea—referred to as unassigned training (未占缺訓練)—had been under discussion by the Examination Yuan since 2012. Several studies were also conducted to assess its feasibility and explore potential approaches for practical implementation (Shih & Chen, 2012; The Examination Yuan, 2013; Huang et al., 2014). Under the unassigned training initiative officially adopted in 2017, exam passers participating in on-the-job training are not pre-granted any vacant position within the agency providing the training. Also, the time spent in training is not counted toward seniority, nor is it considered in the evaluation of year-end bonuses.

Although the aim of the 2017 reform is to separate on-the-job training from actual employment, it remains true that a prospective position within the training agency is effectively “reserved” for every candidate who passes the exam. Since the number of candidates assigned to agencies for training is equal to the number of vacant positions within those agencies, it can be expected that all candidates will eventually be appointed to the positions they are training for, with minimal risk of elimination.

Considering the three potential approaches proposed for implementing the unassigned training system in Huang et al. (2014), the reform adopted since 2017 closely aligns with Solution 1, which involved incremental adjustments. Our proposal—derived from interviews with employing agencies—shares similarities with Solution 2. In light of the advantages outlined below, our proposal could present a more effective way to position on-the-job training as a selection mechanism:

First, it clarifies to applicants that passing the exam does not guarantee employment, as the civil service examination is defined as a test of eligibility rather than one for hiring. Among the candidates who pass the eligibility test, the decision for hiring rests entirely with the employing agencies. However, it is highly likely that a job can be secured if the candidate performs well during the on-the-job training, as those

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candidates meet their requirements, only those four will be employed.

<sup>6</sup> In the current system, both individuals who are currently employed in government agencies and those who hold civil service eligibility but have left the government for various reasons can apply for eligibility-based open recruitment.

who pass the examination each year will be given priority consideration for positions available that year. This system will sustain individuals' motivation to participate in the examination while alleviating the concerns of employing agencies about potential lawsuits for failing candidates.

Moreover, our proposal can also alleviate the concern that agency heads may have about leaving someone without a job if they fail a candidate. Since passing the examination is no longer directly tied to employment by law and the recruitment process becomes more competitive (with more individuals passing the examination than available positions), employing agencies can better focus on selecting the most suitable candidates without feeling guilty or fearful.

Third, agencies that are less attractive will then have a greater opportunity to select employees from a larger pool of candidates. If the proposed system is adopted, more individuals will be selected into the training stage (i.e., some individuals who fail the examination under the current system may now pass it). These individuals may be relatively weak in memorization or writing skills, but their work attitudes or other attributes could be compatible with those who score higher in the examination. By including more candidates in the training stage, employing agencies, especially those that are less appealing, will have greater flexibility in their selection process.

However, the proposed adjustment may require redistributing responsibilities between the MOEX and the CSPTC. If the training stage is considered part of the selection process rather than just developmental, the authority to finalize the results should shift from the CSPTC to the MOEX. The MOEX would then be responsible for pass-or-fail decisions, while the CSPTC should focus on designing and delivering courses on the basic skills required for prospective government employees. This change is necessary because the current role of the CSPTC balances both training and protecting civil servants' rights, making it challenging to fail candidates who have passed the national civil service exam. Transferring the authority to the MOEX would help resolve this conflict of responsibilities.

## VI. Conclusion

From the perspective of employing agencies, the pencil-and-paper tests managed

by the MOEX effectively identify individuals with the necessary intellectual capabilities but may not adequately assess work attitudes and other attributes valued by agencies. Enhancing the involvement of employing agencies during the examination phase (e.g., incorporating interviews in addition to pencil-and-paper tests) could help address some of these gaps, but it might also result in higher administrative costs and other challenges. This study thus argues that a higher level of P-O and P-J fit could be more effectively achieved through close evaluation by agencies during the on-the-job training period, a later stage in the civil servant selection (recruitment) process. Redefining the national civil service examination as an eligibility test rather than a recruitment test and expanding the pool of qualified candidates for training would better position employing agencies to fully exercise their authority in personnel selection.

In line with prior studies (Lee, 2023), we found that employing agencies view this issue somehow differently from the Examination Yuan. The agencies are primarily concerned with the costs they would take if they became more involved in the examination process. They are also reluctant to take responsibility for determining who will ultimately be hired solely based on test questions or interview processes, as they feel they lack the expertise to identify the right person through examinations. Generally, they believe it is more efficient for the MOEX to screen the applicants initially, provided they retain the power to reject candidates they find unsuitable. However, the agencies also recognize that they are the only ones who are able to assess whether a candidate is truly fit for the job in practice. They are willing to take on this responsibility during the on-the-job training, but they seek less paperwork and a simpler process for reporting disqualified candidates.

This study contributes to practice by revealing how employing agencies view the issue of enhancing their involvement in the examination process and proposing a model that may help achieve a better match from the agencies' perspective. However, it has certain limitations as well. First, it should be noted that the agencies' perspective may be biased or limited, preventing them from considering the issue from broader angles. Regarding the increased participation of employing agencies during the examination stage, we call for empirical research to gather more evidence on its effectiveness before making any decisions. Currently, certain examination categories or special exams



involve greater participation from agencies. A simple analysis of the correlation between interview scores (where agencies are involved) and work performance, or a comparison of work performance between individuals recruited before and after the introduction of interviews, would be useful. Moreover, the separation of eligibility tests from employment decisions may spark significant debate and public inquiry. Political feasibility could be the major challenge that needs to be addressed. Therefore, the aim of this study is not to propose a fully developed solution detailing how the system should be implemented, but rather to present a reform direction that invites further discussion. Finally, the limited number of interviewees in this study may not fully capture the breadth of insights, despite all participants being experienced and informative. We call for future studies to conduct multiple focus group interviews with representatives from a diverse range of employing agencies, as this approach may better capture the varied perspectives and interactive dynamics among them.

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