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Recruitment of Statisticians in the UK

Background

Professional statistical recruitment in the UK is the responsibility of the UK's Government Statistical Service (GSS), a body that was established back in 1968 under Claus (now Lord) Moser. In the early 70's there were a few senior statisticians and junior assistant statisticians in about 25 government departments, but over time these built up gradually to around 600-700 in total, despite efforts by successive government administrations to pare back the amount of support and manpower needed by the GSS.

Nowadays, the statistical cadre has around 1400 active members in the various government departments and devolved administrations (Welsh Government, Scottish Government, and Northern Ireland Executive) of the UK. Apart from those required to work for the Scottish Government and Northern Ireland Executive, all recruitment is coordinated by the National Statistician's Office in the UK Statistics Authority (UKSA), although owing to its size and unique operational requirements the Office for National Statistics (ONS), the executive arm of the UKSA, carries out some local statistical recruitment for its main offices in Newport, South Wales and Titchfield, Hampshire.

Process

New recruits are brought in via two, quite distinct, schemes. For several decades, the main point of entry has been via the 'Fast Stream' (i.e. management trainee) scheme coordinated by the Cabinet Office in the UK. This method recruits young graduates (or those more mature with considerable management experience) who show not only the technical prowess to work in a statistical post anywhere within government, but in addition display the personal competences and characteristics which, with intensive training, will quickly make them candidates for the main principal statistician grade and thence to progress to senior management positions. The discovery of those competences is achieved through a rigorous examination and interview process, both as an individual and in a group environment, over two separate days, under close scrutiny by trained civil service senior managers and operational psychologists. Only the best achieve the pass standard. Those that are deemed to be 'near-miss' candidates are normally offered a post at junior executive level without the full force of an intensive management training programme and expectation of rapid promotion.

In 2010 the GSS teamed up with its professional counterparts in the government economics service (later joined in 2011 and 2012 by social researchers and operational researchers respectively) to form a common 'Analytical Fast Stream'

approach for these 'high-flying' graduates, requiring a minimum 2:1 honours degree and streamlined assessment to minimise recruitment cost to the public purse. Each profession still maintains an independent approach to professional skills testing, but the broader fast-stream skills are assessed collectively.

In 2004/5, the demand for new recruits from departments due to a growing statistical production environment led to the creation of a centralised junior graduate statistician recruitment scheme (on a par with the 'near-miss' recruits above) but focusing solely on statistical expertise during the examination and interview process. This had the effect of swelling an already growing statistical cadre within a couple of years by around 200 additional personnel. This in turn led to development of a grading structure which allowed for those individuals, in time, to progress, through new intermediary grades, towards principal statistician. The benefits of this centralised scheme were clearly identified at the outset: to ensure consistency and standards of profession across government as well as ensuring an efficient approach to professional recruitment. Standards of degree qualification were imposed (minimum 2:2 honours) and a competence framework drawn up to show expected levels of skill across the whole statistical 'value chain' (including collection, analysis and dissemination of data, as well as knowledge of professional issues).

Do other Workshop delegates have similar or contrasting schemes?

Key Issues

One of the key difficulties faced by any recruiting organisation is how to attract the right graduates or those close to graduation. Much of this depends on how the scheme is marketed and, particularly for a management trainee scheme, where it appears in the national league tables. The UK Civil Service Fast Stream has an excellent reputation, and traditionally has attracted a large number of applicants for its Generalist recruitment programme, but when it comes to finding suitable statistical candidates we find the starting applicant base from which to examine is considerably reduced. This could be for several reasons:

- Fewer students studying mathematical sciences
- Reduction in marketing expenditure due to public spending reductions generally
- Public sector seen less favourable for a career compared to private for analytical posts
- Working outside London may limit career prospects (many departments are outside the capital)
- The 'offer' isn't as good as it once was, e.g. promotion opportunities curtailed owing to job cuts, fewer retirements etc

Delegates at the Workshop are invited to comment on the above and share their experience.

Further Thoughts

Although strictly not within the category of 'Recruitment' an important follow-up aspect is Retention. As economies pick up after recession, there is a natural tendency for private sector organisations that employ mathematical analysts in any reasonable number (e.g. financial institutions, pharmaceutical sector) to look more attractive in terms of career and remuneration. Furthermore, recent changes in the UK Civil Service pension arrangements for new employees have removed that 'carrot' from the equation.

To counter this attraction, the GSS is looking to actively manage its Fast Stream cadre in a more effective manner. This will require an analysis of job descriptions, making available a full suite of learning and development courses and experiences, an approach to active career management around the GSS, and, perhaps more importantly, a re-education of their line managers as to what is expected of them and their protégés. Of these, career management provides probably the greatest challenge as the GSS is a decentralised federation of professionals working in different legal entities (i.e. government departments/agencies/devolved administrations) who have their own Human Resources (HR) management and pressures. It is also very widespread throughout the British mainland, so relocation issues instantly become a problem when movement around posts is being encouraged.

Do these issues ring true with Workshop delegates and if so, what can you offer by way of experience?

What else can delegates add to this debate?

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