Moving recruitment online in the Belgian Federal Public Service of Finance

This case study was prepared in the context of OECD research on the Future of Work in 2020-2021. The case study focusses on the introduction of a pilot exercise on e-recruitment in the Belgian Federal Public Service of Finance in 2020-21 following the Belgian government’s decision to make telework the norm in the public sector in 2020 as a response to the COVID19-pandemic. The e-recruitment process consisted a holistic process from employer branding to candidate assessment and onboarding.
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Introduction

Public services around the world face challenges attracting and recruiting people with specific skill sets. Some of these skill sets are in established fields such as law or IT; others relate to relatively new and emerging professions such as cyber-security and artificial intelligence. Recruitment challenges may also refer to specific demographics, such as recent university graduates or experienced managers. Perception of better-paid jobs in the private sector is a factor, but it is not the only factor. Governments are addressing recruitment and retention challenges through a variety of practices.

Public administrations have had aspects of their recruitment procedures online for years: online application portals and some degree of online testing and assessment are considered well-established practices across OECD public administrations. But frequently, the end goal of recruitment procedures involving an online component is to filter candidates to arrive at a small enough candidate pool that can be invited for further in-person testing and/or interviews. In this broad sense, this type of ‘online recruitment’ can be understood as the partial digitalisation of some of the steps involved in attracting, assessing and recruiting candidates.

The Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic has given rise to a new, more holistic form of ‘e-recruitment’. Widespread remote working in the public sector has interrupted many planned and in-progress recruitment processes. This has given public administrations the space to re-think how recruitment can and should work – not just to maintain continuity, but to be used more strategically as a tool to attract, assess, recruit and on-board candidates with the types of skills and experience valuable for the public sector.

The development and testing of e-recruitment practices is one area of public sector reform of particular interest for the Future of Work. This is because successful end-to-end e-recruitment involves a wholesale re-think of what recruitment looks like, from improving employer branding and investing in social media outreach to re-evaluating the skill set and profile of a recruiter or hiring manager in the public sector. Modern and future-oriented e-recruitment is so much more than the digitalisation of a previously analogue process. The pilot project on e-recruitment developed by the Belgian Federal Public Service of Finance (FPSF) aligns explicitly with the call of the OECD Recommendation on Public Service Leadership and Capability (PSLC) to develop future-oriented public employment systems (OECD, 2019):

- Continuously identify skills and competencies needed to transform political vision into services which deliver value to society.
- Attract and retain employees with the skills and competencies required from the labour market.
- Recruit, select and promote candidates through transparent, open and merit-based processes, to guarantee fair and equal treatment.

Background to e-recruitment in the Belgian Federal Public Service of Finance

The e-recruitment project was launched in 2019. E-recruitment was intended to broaden the reach of the FPSF and make it easier for recruiters to assess different types of skill sets. However, it is a good example of a project whose development and impact was accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic. For context, the FPSF has around 20,000 public servants. In
2019, it hired 1,170 staff members, of which 350 were first employment contracts. In 2020, 705 public servants were recruited of which 400 contracts were first employment.

Table 1. Number of interviews in real life in 2019 vs. digital interviews in 2020

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<tr>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviews for public servant positions, 2019</td>
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<td>Interviews for public servant positions, 2020</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interviews for public servant positions held virtually, 2020</td>
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<tr>
<td>Promotion interviews, 2019</td>
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<td>Promotion interviews, 2020</td>
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<td>Promotion interviews held virtually, 2020</td>
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<td>Horizontal mobility interviews, 2019</td>
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<td>Horizontal mobility interviews, 2020</td>
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<td>Horizontal mobility interviews held virtually, 2020</td>
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<td>Total 2019</td>
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<td>Total 2020</td>
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<tr>
<td>Virtual interviews, total 2020</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interviews held for first employment, 2020</td>
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Source: Belgian Federal Public Service of Finance

The FPSF uses a variety of recruitment methods. External candidates usually sit a computer-based test and have an interview (and in some cases role-play exercises or assessment centre). Candidates for internal promotion sit a computer-based test, assessment centre, and interview. For internal mobility programmes (i.e. horizontal), there is an interview and in some cases a computer-based test or technical presentation. These three ‘streams’ were moved almost exclusively online in 2020 and will be expanded in 2021.

Adapting a phased approach to e-recruitment in the Belgian Federal Public Service of Finance

On 16 March 2020 in reaction to the rising cases of COVID-19 infections, the Belgian government introduced extensive restrictions on public mobility, social movement as well as restrictions affecting the public workforce. As part of these decisions, teleworking became the norm in the Belgian public service and selection and promotion procedures were put on hold.

Phase 1

In April 2020, the Federal Public Service of Finance began a pilot exercise of the e-recruitment tool for internal mobility. As a first step, this included the roll-out of virtual interviews conducted via Skype for business (later Microsoft Teams). In order to support candidates, the Human Resources department of the FPSF developed a candidate handbook to guide candidates through the technical process. The code of ethics was also provided electronically and candidates were asked to sign the code digitally (a good example of priming techniques and ‘nudging’ to compensate for the impossibility to verify).

As such, the entire process was rolled out paperless and online. Similarly to interviews held in person, the interviews were conducted by recruiters and the hiring manager. In order to
enable the recruiters to assess the candidates in this virtual format, recruiters received training on digital interview techniques and non-verbal communication.

**Phase 2**

During the second phase of the pilot, online interviews were further rolled out and applied to all vacancies/functions where technical skills were to be evaluated. In most cases, technical skills are evaluated during the interviews, although at times the candidate has to complete a technical test sent via encrypted e-mail and within an allotted time.

Regarding the organisation of the interviews, the handbook for candidates was improved to better reflect common issues and a helpline for candidates was set up. While technical issues were not frequent, the manual does describe how to react to any issues arising. In case a candidate cannot participate in an interview due to technical issues, the interview is rescheduled. To mitigate the risk of discriminating against some candidates, decentralised job partners offer training to help candidates for the online interviews. Overall, this led to a high satisfaction on the user-friendliness of the tool according to a survey conducted by the Federal Public Service of Finance.

**Phase 3**

In the final pilot phase, CV-screening to assess the motivation of candidates and digital assessments consisting of an exercise for a mock presentation and/or a roleplay exercise were introduced. As such, the standard e-recruitment process now consists of three phases: cv-screening, written test and interview. HR oversees the entire recruitment process, while managers only participate in the interview. After the successful pilot, e-recruitment will also be used for external recruitment (foreseen for August 2021) and promotions (starting from June 2021).

Overall, the advantages of e-recruitment, namely increased transparency, flexibility, efficiency and participation outweigh the challenges related to supervision of candidates during the examination phase, possible technical problems, lack of IT skills and security concerns. Candidates rated the experience very well. The feedback stressed in particular the reduced travel time, higher efficiency, lower levels of stress, and flexibility of the recruitment process.

**Branding and on-boarding**

Going beyond the interview process, the FPSF also launched a digital job fair as part of the e-recruitment pilot. Using social media helped create a high awareness of vacant positions and brand the FPSF as an attractive employer. The FPSF held ‘Facebook live’ events and webinar teams which had over 7,700 views with more than 25,000 people reached. Each department presented its key functions and role, followed by a Q&A session. Overall, the digital job fair allowed the FPSF to advertise more than 200 vacant position, for which ultimately 4,300 candidates applied. While in total fewer candidates were recruited in 2020 than 2019, the general impression within the FPSF was that the quality of candidates had increased given the in-depth process in designing the new e-recruitment tool with a focus on the needs of the departments and candidates. To further increase attractiveness and better target candidates, the FPSF worked with an external partner to define an employer branding strategy which will be launched throughout 2021.

The strength of the Belgian experience was also the broad understanding of e-recruitment, including actions related to on-boarding of new recruits. Conscious of the challenge to
integrate new recruits into the public service during the COVID-19 pandemic, the FPSF redesigned the on-boarding model. While prior to the pandemic, a physical welcome day would have been organised, the new model foresaw a virtual welcome day and e-training. Furthermore, the importance of the manager for integrating new recruits into the team and public service was highlighted and an onboarding toolkit developed with managers receiving a checklist prior to any new employee arriving.

Success factors

Providing clear information upfront about the recruitment process to candidates facilitates the recruitment process and ensures a higher quality of candidates
Developing a phased approach in line with capacities helps adapt the process to challenges and opportunities encountered
Ensuring buy-in from recruiters and managers helps involve them throughout the recruitment process and can result in better candidate match.
Supporting managers who are not used to doing online recruitment is important to ensure that they adapt their questions and techniques to the online tool being used
Building awareness throughout the organisation that introducing e-recruitment will initially have to be accompanied by additional investment for example training, data protection software and proctoring software (to verify the identity of the test-taker), in case of technical tests.
Considering the development of new roles within HR to drive forward the introduction of e-recruitment, such as data protection officer, and new HR roles such as proactive candidate sourcing.

Conclusion

This case study illustrates that e-recruitment is a potentially valuable tool for public services eager to attract a greater number and quality of candidates. A key conclusion of the pilot study carried out by the Federal Public Service of Finance is that strategic e-recruitment calls for the re-examination of candidate needs and expectations at each stage of the advertising, assessment, recruitment and on-boarding processes. With multiple operational, procedural and technical barriers to overcome, e-recruitment involves the need to gain the buy-in of a large range of stakeholders. It may also require targeted up-skilling in order to make sure that recruiters and managers have a shared vision for the advantages – and limitations – of e-recruitment.

In the public sector across the OECD, many recruitment processes still require in-person presence for testing and/or interviews. The switch to widespread remote working in the public service during the Covid pandemic interrupted many of these processes. The example of the pilot project from Belgium has shown that it is possible to move many – even most – parts of the recruitment process online. However, e-recruitment in this sense is about much more than the digital version of analogue or in-person processes. Online assessments are possible, for example, but may come with privacy concerns. Online interviews have been in use even before the crisis – but come with a trade-off in terms of what competences can be tested.

Resolving these challenges and developing new or adjusted processes can help Human Resource departments fulfil their mandate to be true business partners and add value in finding and hiring great candidates. Administrations that already use aspects of e-recruitment in an ad-hoc manner – such as through LinkedIn job postings or sporadic use
of video interview tools – may find themselves better placed to stitch these practices together into a coherent strategy.

Despite security concerns such as proctoring and data retention, and limitations in terms of assessing or taking non-verbal communication into account, the experience of the Belgian pilot has shown that the advantages of e-recruitment outweigh the disadvantages. The next steps for the Federal Public Service of Finance is to accelerate the integration of e-recruitment into a broader variety of recruitment processes and accompany the scaling up of the pilot team with targeted training and increased engagement across the Federal public service.