

Court of Auditors

EPSO

Special Report

A largely unsuitable selection process

The report just made public by the Court of Auditors on the European Personnel Selection Office (EPSO) confirms the pitfalls repeatedly denounced by R&D for months, even years.

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The lack of attractiveness of the European institutions, recruitment at basic grades despite confirmed professional experience, the creation of new recruitment channels as open to criticism as the Junior Professional Program, the difficulty for fellow contract agents to have prospects of long-term employment, the lottery generated by internal competitions... so many problems clearly identified for a long time by **R&D** which show that the recruitment system is unsuited to the needs of the Institutions and particularly to the European Commission.

With the special report on EPSO that the Court of Auditors has just made public, this finding is once again confirmed.

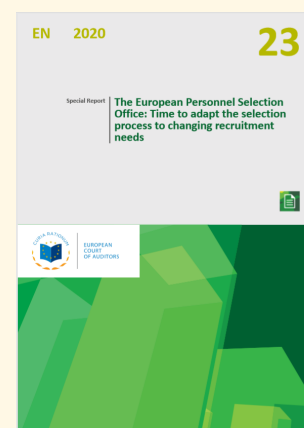
Since 2003, these competitions have been organised by the European Personnel Selection Office (EPSO), in cooperation with the institutions.

The EPSO selection process has been running in its current frame since 2012 with large-scale generalist competitions (public administrators, lawyers, economists, linguists, secretarial assistants, etc.) and specialist competitions from which have come 42% of the winners identified between 2012 and 2018. This process has three phases: planning, assessing candidates, and publication of reserve

lists. The tests vary from one competition to the next, but the phases of each competition are generally similar with a preselection (psychometric tests on a computer), an examination of application files, a talent screener for some competitions, the assessment centre where candidates are assessed against a set of predefined skills and competencies, and finally, a reserve list.

Every year, the EU institutions recruit around 1 000 new permanent staff members (officials) for long-term careers, from more than 50 000 applicants.

Generalist profiles represented 37 % of all requests for laureates, over the 2012-2018 period, and linguists an additional 20 %. Over the years, there has been a decline in the generalist profiles. The demand for translators has plummeted in recent years, as a result of technological progress, as well as from decisions to increase the use of outsourcing. The context for recruitment within the institutions has changed since the design and implementation of the EPSO Development Programme. Since 2012, the reserve lists of most of the competitions organized by EPSO have fewer than 20 successful candidates. One can therefore wonder about the cost of such procedures.



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1. The "EU Careers" brand, created in 2010 with the aim of increasing the attractiveness of the EU as an employer, has not fulfilled its objective, both geographically and socio-economically

On the one hand, it appears that the "EU Careers" brand remains very concentrated in Brussels and Luxembourg and is not very attractive beyond, geographically speaking.

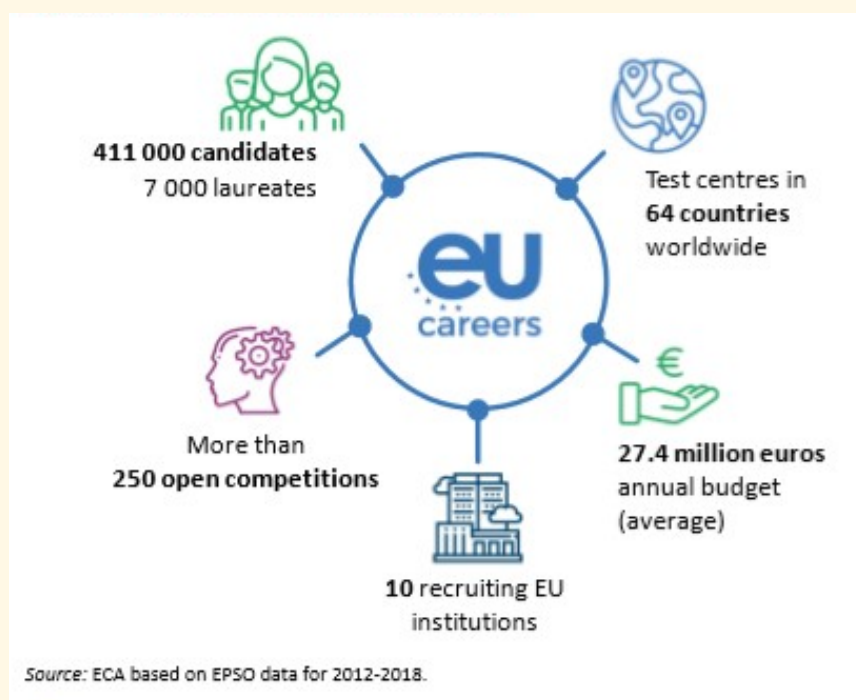
It appears that 37% of the people who answered the surveys carried out outside of EPSO assessment centres declared having a direct link with the institutions, either because they were already employed by one of them, or because they worked in the public sector and exercised functions related to the EU. Whatever their nationality, two thirds of the candidates take the pre-selection tests in Belgium or Luxembourg.

Candidates for AD5 competitions often have professional experience and the proportion of candidates under the age of 35 is declining. **Only 22% of recently recruited AD civil servants are under 35 and 62% are over 40.** These officials already had at least 10 years of professional experience by the time they joined the institutions, much longer than that generally required for competition grades.

In 2019, the average age of entry into the Commission for AD officials was 39 years old. For the last generalist AD / 2018 competition, the average age of the successful candidates was 31.5 years. Currently less than 4% of the Commission's workforce is under 30 years old.

It follows that the recruitment of experienced people to entry-level positions is detrimental to the age pyramid of the workforce and to career management.

And in the face of this imbalance, some institutions like the Commission have launched their own "Professional Juniors" programs in defiance of the rules of equal treatment, and opening the door to favouritism.



The "EU Careers" brand has failed to attract sufficient numbers of university graduates or young professionals.

2. An inadequate recruitment process for specialists

However, it should be noted that the regular organization of large-scale competitions has generally helped to ensure the availability of an appropriate number of generalists who could be recruited. However, with regard to specialists (eg specialist linguists, administrators specialized in macroeconomics or information and communication technologies, etc.), the EPSO process is not suited to the current needs of the institutions.

On the one hand, the EPSO selection process is too long, on the other hand, it is too expensive for this type of competition.

Therefore, the institutions prefer to launch their own recruitment procedures, which last on average eight months against thirteen months for EPSO, giving full latitude for using any type of test they deem necessary, and then opt for the recruitment of temporary staff rather than officials.

All profiles combined, the average cost per successful candidate for generalist competitions amounts to around € 24,000. Broken down by function groups, this cost is € 25,000 per AD laureate, € 21,900 per AST-SC laureate and € 15,300 per AST-SC successful candidate, knowing that the preselection tests cost between € 48 and € 92 per candidate, depending on the competition.

For specialized competitions, the cost varies greatly depending on the number of candidates and successful candidates. Since the latter is generally very low, the average costs are high: nearly € 30,000 per successful candidate for AD7 lawyer-linguists (26 laureates for 1,170 candidates), or even nearly € 40,000 for AD5 and AD7 conference interpreters (13 laureates for 573 candidates).



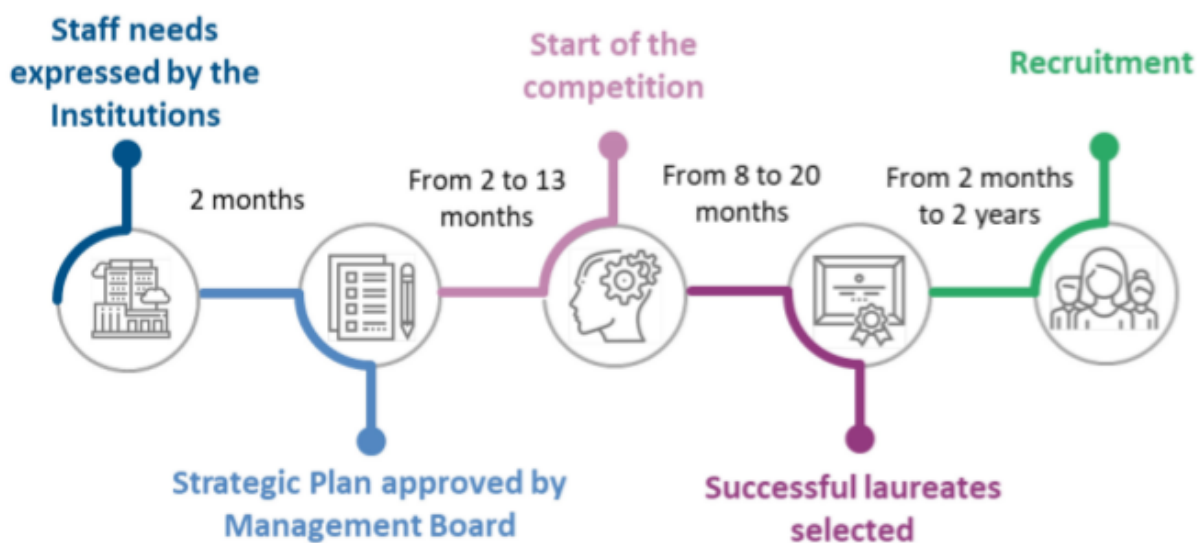
3. The weaknesses of the recruitment process

Psychometric tests are not only used to assess the suitability of candidates for the job, but also, in fact, to exclude some of them in order to facilitate the management of the competition procedure. It should be noted that when these tests are used, 16.5 % of candidates on average give up the competition before taking them. The success rate (ratio between the number of successful candidates and the number of applicants who have taken at least the 1st test) is 2 %. So, the process is very competitive. But there is no mechanism to measure the satisfaction of the institutions with the candidates recruited.

The **limited number of languages** that can be used for some parts of the selection process creates legal uncertainty. Legal actions led to the cancellation of competitions (without cancelling the aptitude lists) and the suspension of EPSO's activities for a good part of 2016. The current re-

game has not been annulled by a decision of a court, but language limitations open the way to new legal actions.

Finally, competitions depend on the availability of jury **members**, who are appointed on an equal basis between the administration and the staff representation. However, all the parties have difficulty finding competent and available staff to attend a competition jury. Not only is the **lack of cooperation between EPSO and the institutions** a cause, but also the **total lack of recognition of the interest of the service** in the procedure, which does not facilitate the engagement of staff in these tasks. In addition, managers are often reluctant to release their best performing agents to perform these tasks.



Source: ECA based on EPSO data.

Faced with these issues, the Court of Auditors has issued several recommendations to which **R&D** fully subscribes:

- 1) Address identified weaknesses in the selection process,
- 2) Introduce a new selection framework for specialist competitions,
- 3) Improve EPSO's capacity to adapt to a fast-changing recruitment environment.

R&D requests that these recommendations are fit into the more general framework of HR strategy. It is indeed a matter of developing a holistic approach to the question of recruitment and not of inventing "quick fix" procedures such as the JPP or the selection of temporary agents to overcome specific problems because, over and above, recruitment places the whole of career development into question.

In this regard, **R&D** reiterates its attachment to the basic principles of the civil service: equal treatment between candidates and competition with anonymous tests. **R&D** has always worked in this direction by allowing all potential candidates to be trained free of charge since it is not a question of "business" on the backs of colleagues.

No, the future of all those who dedicate themselves to the European civil service is such an important matter that one cannot conceive that this service will not finally be seriously reformed.

Cristiano Sebastiani,
President

