

How to write a Personal Statement in the UK Civil Service

- A summary note to accompany the one slide introduction on apolitical's 4 May online conference

A brief overview of what a Personal Statement is and how it fits into the way the Uk Civil Service recruits and promotes

A Personal Statement, usually, is a free-form 'pitch' for a Civil Service job. It may be as short as 250 words or, especially for Senior Civil Service appointments, as long as 1250 words (say 2 pages of A4). Usually, it calls for applicants to address a list of "Essential Criteria" listed in the job advert with evidence and examples of how they meet these requirements drawing on their experience and track record of career achievement. But it may also call for applicants to state why they are applying and to sell themselves by citing their motivations and passions that are relevant to the job.

Government departments vary in what they want applicants to include in personal statements but this flexibility is strictly within an overall recruitment process applied across the service - Success Profiles. This has five elements: Behaviours, Strengths, Ability, Experience, and Technical, allowing recruiting managers freely to draw on these to tailor the process to the vacancy to be filled. A candidate overview can be found at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/744219/Success-Profiles-Candidate-Overview.pdf

This means that the requirement for a Personal Statement will usually be combined into a comprehensive application form including a CV recording Experience and Technical qualifications where appropriate; and a requirement for applicants to provide detailed examples against each of the recruiting manager's selection of perhaps 3 or 4 Behaviours drawn from the Civil Service 9 Behaviours. Strengths (the UK CS has a list of 36 in its "Strengths Dictionary") are usually formally tested only at interview although the Essential Criteria and what departments say they want to see in a personal statement may encourage applicants to include some form of self-assessment of their strengths.

What do those who have been successful do?

1. **They read** the recruitment adverts forensically because they know that you have to follow the selection process to the letter, and that there are considerable variations in how CS departments and agencies use Success Profiles, and task applicants to write a Personal Statement They always ask for guidance on exactly what the application process is if it is not clear (and regrettably often isn't) e.g. whether Behaviours are to be covered within the word count of the Personal Statement

2. **They know** who they are, what they can offer the job/promotion market – have an up-to-date CV which they have wrestled with to summarise their Career Experience, Skills and Behaviours and therefore what they are offering the job market and tailored to jobs applied for. The CV is their “Mirror” that they may have struggled to write but it should read impressively and should be the skeleton structure to give them confidence to approach writing a Personal Statement

3. **They see** the Personal Statement (aka sometimes as a “Statement of Suitability”) as an opportunity (*just like a presentation called for at the start of an interview*) to do one or more of the following and make sure they know which one is asked for:
 - **sell** their capabilities and experience in relation to the job applied for, including strengths [**BEIS quote]
 - **to match** their experience and capabilities specifically and evidentially to a list of “Essential and Desirable Criteria”
 - **offer** grounded examples of their effective performance directly relevant to the job applied for (see below) whether S-T-A-R based past examples or present actions

4. **They intuitively choose** examples and evidence of their track record in the personal statement and wider application form that meet, as far as possible, what my experience tells me influences sifting panels positively:
 1. Related closely as possible to the job/grade applied for
 2. Illustrate exactly the core meaning of the Behaviour definition
 3. Unarguable metrics and attested qualitative evidence of success
 4. Represent a genuinely personal challenge they faced (not just the team – selection is about what an individual offers!)
 5. Let the panel in on how they thought about the problem, their actions and why they took the path they did. NOT just a list of activities
 6. Made the actions memorable in the panel’s minds e.g word pictures, anecdotes, colourful summaries
 7. More important than just describing the outcome as a “success”, they focus on ensuring the example is credible and ‘real’ in the panel’s mind. Often a less than 100% success story is more realistic and influential!

5. **They make sure** that any **Situation-Task-Action-Result** examples they include are presented broadly according to:
 - a guiding approximation:
25% max on **S & T** and 75% on **A & R**
 - include (especially for the interview) what they have **Learned** from that experience that is **Transferable** to the job applied. Hence **S.T.A.R.Le.T**

They know that the panel is not really interested in the details of a historic example in another job - only in what the example tells them about what the candidate would be bringing to **their** job.

6. **They prepare** as best they can to take every opportunity to identify and sell themselves through their Strengths, even though the official Success Profile process is that Strengths are decided by the vacancy holders for questioning in the interview only. But, some strengths are discernible from the job description, person specification and list of Essential Criteria
7. **Above all, they are authentic**, telling it in the personal statement 'from the heart' rather than the head – lively, personal and believable, not flat scripted constructs. This applies particularly to the interview of course as that is interactive. Panels can often sense a manufactured 'scripted' example whereas what they really want is to be convinced by the candidate being real. So, for example, the STAR structure should be somewhat in the background and the "story" more in the foreground
8. **Finally, are focused on their application (including the personal statement) being a platform for getting to the 'party', the final interview, not to get the job.** That's all that the sift is about. But, at interview, the challenge changes to how to be a compelling stand-out from a group of other interviewee candidate who could all do the job. This is a vital distinction as it demands a major change of mindset and requires separate and additional preparation for each stage of the recruitment process. Many candidates are credible, know their stuff, and have prepared. But they have not thought through what they are offering that it would be a hard for the other interviewees to replicate or counter.

Writing a brilliant personal statement – what do the 'successfuls' do?

They:

- make sure they have read the process in the advert forensically – personal statements vary in what is required!
- are clear about what they are offering and can evidence it especially lessons learned – their CV is the foundation
- intuitively put themselves into the mindset of the sift panel when writing it
- know that the personal statement needs to tick the boxes for the sift criteria - a quite different challenge from getting through the interview
- focus on evidence that:
 - speaks to the job/grade applied for, not history for its own sake
 - represents a personal challenge that is clear
 - above all, showed how they made sense of it, considered their actions and why
 - is memorable so they stand out from the other candidates
 - includes their strengths wherever possible/allowable
- are true to themselves and frank but leave the adventurous and risky to the interview



© Richard Hillsdon

May 2023

richard@mcneilrobertson.com