

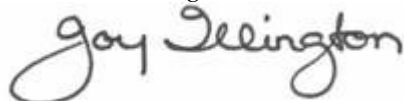
At a Glance is a summary of the highlights of the Office of the Merit Commissioner's 2007/08 annual report, available on our website.

My mandate as an independent officer is to monitor the application of the merit principle under the *Public Service Act*. This year marks the 100th anniversary of the principle of merit as a requirement for hiring and promotions in the BC public service.

Government's capacity to deliver public services depends on its ability to attract and keep well-qualified and engaged employees. I believe this is only achievable in conjunction with merit-based staffing practices.

Although the audits this year show the majority of appointments were based on merit, an analysis of the findings reveals a pattern of persistent problems which require management action to correct. With one third of the public service eligible to retire by 2015, government cannot rely on passive methods for managers to learn about merit-based staffing practices.

I recommend a proactive campaign of training about the staffing process, with an emphasis on managers' accountabilities in merit-based hiring.



Joy Illington, Merit Commissioner

The principle of merit

The BC public service is accountable to hire and promote employees based on the principle of merit, without political influence. Merit means that appointments are based on an assessment of competence and ability to do the job.

Monitoring the application of merit

To provide oversight of and insight into the performance of merit-based hiring in the BC public service, we undertake random audits, independent staffing reviews, and special studies. We also do outreach and education.

1. 2007 Audit results

The Office's annual audit focused on the appointments that form the long-term workforce; to reveal whether recruitment and selection processes were properly applied to result in merit-based appointments, and whether the individuals appointed were qualified.

The Office sampled 10% of these appointments, making this year's audit the largest we have done. The results can be reliably generalized to the larger population of all regular appointments, over seven month temporary appointments, and direct appointments in the BC public service.

The audit found that 80% of appointments were the result of a merit-based process with no exceptions. In the remaining 20% of appointments, managers did not follow basic

hiring policy, collective-agreement or statutory obligations that affect merit.

There was no evidence that any individuals were not qualified for the positions to which they were appointed, nor did the audit find any appointments based on patronage.

Merit in the selection process	
Conclusion	Extrapolated #s
Merit applied	4,377 (80%)
Merit with exception*	846 (15%)
Merit not applied	111 (2%)
Unable to determine	174 (3%)

* These were based on merit but the selection process involved exceptions to hiring policy or collective agreement obligations.

The three most frequent areas requiring improvement were:

- a) Documentation:** More than 50% of files received were missing records. Proper documentation demonstrates accountability in decision-making. 3% of the appointments were so poorly documented that a determination of merit could not be made.
- b) Assessing Years of Continuous Service:** This is one of the factors of merit, and for positions covered by the BCGEU collective agreement it must be assessed using a specific formula. This calculation was not done or done incorrectly in many cases. These errors can affect a candidate's appointment or order of placement on an eligibility list.
- c) Notification:** Managers are required to notify employee applicants about the

outcome of competitions. Hundreds of employees were not notified. In these cases, the employer failed to offer feedback on performance. The employee right to challenge the merit of an appointment was also circumvented. Full disclosure is a simple way to help reinforce confidence in the merit of staffing decisions. Transparency in hiring is linked to trust in merit.

The Office also conducted a special audit of all direct appointments. An individual can be appointed without competition in unusual or exceptional circumstances. The appointment must be based on merit and it must have the approval of the head of the BC Public Service Agency. A small number of direct appointments were approved in 2007. Others were made without authorization.

The Merit Commissioner made three recommendations for systemic improvements to the repetitive errors observed in the annual audit, and recommended published guidelines on the use of direct appointments. The BC Public Service Agency is acting on these recommendations.

2. Review results

Upon an employee applicant request, the Commissioner provides a final and binding review of the application of merit for appointments to bargaining unit positions. There were 10 requests made this year, and all were found to comply with merit.

3. Focus Groups

In the public service Work Environment Survey, almost one third of employees who responded disagreed that merit was the basis for hiring in their work units. Our Office commissioned province-wide focus groups with employees to hear their experiences. Participants had many different definitions of merit. Although some found job interviews stressful, they valued manager feedback and communication about selection processes. Fully 24% believed they had been unsuccessful in a competition because the results were pre-determined. The full report is available on the Office's website.

4. Education and Outreach

The Merit Commissioner met directly with groups of employees around the province, to talk about merit. She made presentations at national conferences, and met with representatives from other countries about the Office's role in strengthening democratic governance through transparent hiring.

Looking forward

In 2007, 26% of all hires and promotions were short-term temporary appointments. In 2008, the Office will provide further insight into the application of the merit principle through an audit of these short-term temporary appointments.

In 2009, the Office will pilot a new approach to auditing in order to produce more timely reports.



2007/08
At a Glance

Oversight and Insight into Merit-Based
Hiring in the BC Public Service

Website: www.meritcomm.bc.ca