

# Civil service selection systems across Europe – lessons for Spain

Written by Gracia Vara Arribas

**Is your public administration fit for the future?**

**The Spanish public sector saw itself confronted by this question recently. It ranks third among OECD countries with the highest percentage of civil servants in national public administrations aged 55 and older. Between 2010 and 2015 this percentage increased from 25% to 35%, a trend which seems to be ongoing (OECD (2017), *Government at a Glance 2017*, OECD Publishing, Paris.**

In fact, the average age of civil servants in Spanish public administration (not counting armed forces and security) increased from 46 years in 2004 to 52 at the beginning of 2019. This is nearly a decade over the average age of Spain's active population (42.5 years). This means that around 51% of national-level civil servants will retire within the next decade.

Along with an imminent wave of retirement, Spanish public administration is faced with the Europe-wide challenge of digital transformation and the need to attract young talent. Yet mass retirement also represents an opportunity. Civil service selection processes can be revised and adapted to future needs.

It is these concerns that led to the 10-11 April 2019 EIPA and IVAP ( Instituto Vasco de Administracion Publica, the Basque Institute of Public Administration) conference. More than 150 civil servants participated in the event. The conference presented a comparative view of civil service selection systems across Europe,

focusing on Spanish national and local practices and lessons for improving the present (rather obsolete) system.

Initially, a brief diagnosis of the weaknesses of Spanish selection processes was provided, with a view to future reforms. The first morning was followed by a comparative examination of selection systems in neighboring countries. These constitute examples of good practice in human resources competency-based management: Concrete and detailed cases were presented from European institutions through the European Personnel Selection Office (EPSO), the Irish Public Appointments Service (an independent and executive arm of its Civil Service Recruitment Policy) as well as selection, evaluation and promotion systems of public top-level managers in different European Member States. Recruitment strategies and systems as well as selection processes from specific European countries were examined before diving into national-level Spanish civil service.

The European Personnel Selection Office, EPSO, is tasked with the increasingly difficult job of selecting candidates to the European Union's institutions. But how can a single Office, using a largely unified process, undergo selection of both 1) highly specialized experts (such a nuclear sites inspectors, competition law lawyers, chemical or artificial intelligence IT engineers) and 2) generalists (project managers or secretaries among others)? The question is how to ensure that selection is fair while also ensuring that the treatment of candidates coming from 28 Member States, representing 24 official languages, is non-discriminatory. The latter is difficult, considering that the Union's institutions only have 3 working languages (English, French and German). Further, how can the right balance between selections based on candidates' competences and knowledge be found?

Turning to the Irish case, it is particularly enlightening for Spain. This represents a

transformative journey of over 15 years, initiated by new legislation and the need for reform.

The Irish Civil Service Recruitment Policy is developed by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. It is carried out by the Public Appointments Service, which is its executive, but independent, arm. The latter is responsible for the selection and recruitment of almost all positions. It is fascinating to see that since 2007 (and reinforced in 2014) even the high grades of senior management are only accessible through open competition, ensuring that civil service leaders have the right competences.

Through job analysis of roles from entry-level to senior management, Ireland identified the key skills and competencies required for effective performance. They were thereby able to design recruitment processes informed by best practice.

The range and versatility of selection tools applied in Ireland included psychometric tests, interviews, role plays, assessment questionnaires and strategic exercises. Their introduction has mitigated risk and serves as a source of inspiration for other countries. Moreover, innovative schemes like senior civil service mobility, experimenting with video

interviewing, apprenticeships and internships for university graduates are wonderful examples of how the public sector can find solutions to contemporary challenges.

During the second day, several academic speakers argued for an evidence-based recruitment process meant to attract and assess talent and transferrable skills necessary to deal with current challenges. Several constructs and process-methodologies were introduced, and research on the utility of selection assessment tools was reviewed. Finally, the event closed with an open discussion on the implementation of these suggestions into human resource policies.

The two work-days confirmed prior academic suggestions that selection procedures must address the reality of an ageing workforce and of a technological revolution whose impact will be felt over the next 10-15 years.

You can consult the presentations of the conference [here](#).

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*The views expressed in this blog are those of the authors and not necessarily those of EIPA.*