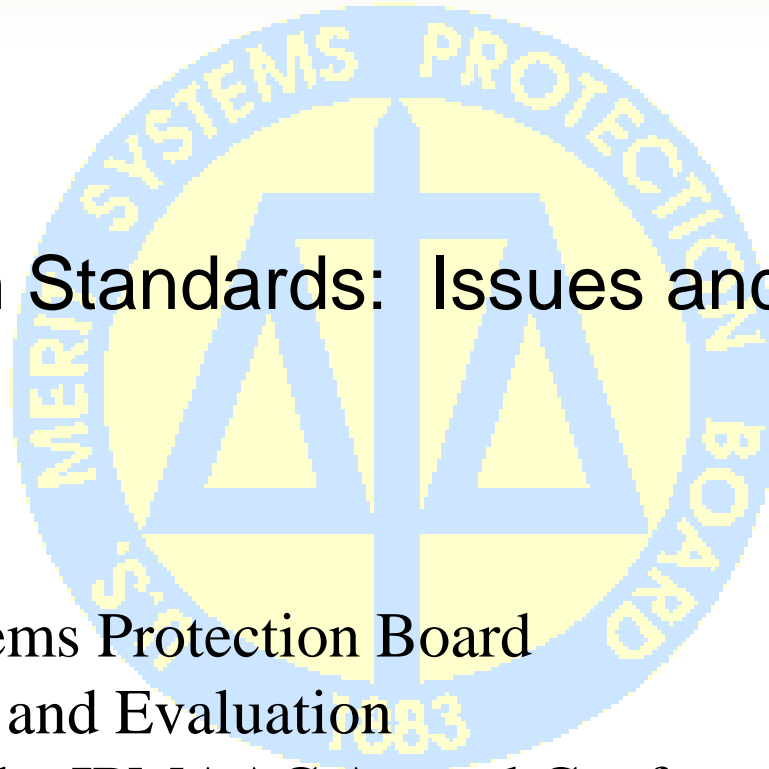


# Qualification Standards: Issues and Implications

U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board  
Office of Policy and Evaluation

Presentation to the IPMAAC Annual Conference  
June 11, 2008



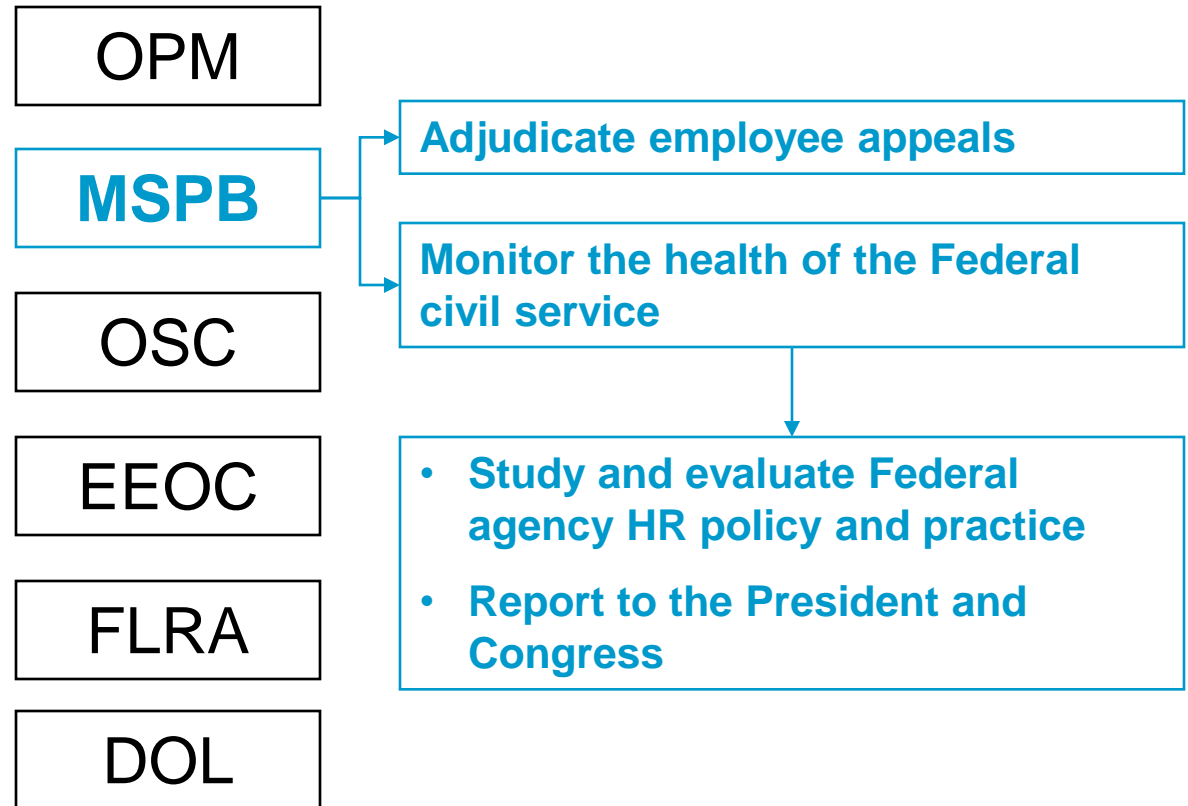
# Overview

- Background
  - Who we are
  - Study scope, questions, and methodology
  - The Federal MQ structure
- Issues and hypotheses
- Promising developments



# Who We Are: About MSPB

MSPB is one of several Executive Branch agencies responsible for some aspect of the Federal civil service.



# Study Scope and Questions

- Scope: Federal Government, professional and administrative (PATCO P/A) occupations
- How do agencies define and assess MQ?
- What functions do MQs serve?
- How well are MQs working?
- What changes, if any, should be made?
  - Structure and content of MQs
  - Implementation of MQs
  - Policies related to MQs and ratings



# Purpose: Why MQs Matter

- Workforce quality
- Fairness and legal compliance
- Effects on applicants and employees
- Efficiency and effectiveness
  - Cost of development and application
  - ROI of recruitment and assessment



# A Quick Thought Exercise

- What does “qualified” mean to you?
  - Able to do the job? With what likelihood?
  - “Not unable” to do the job?
- What does “qualified” mean to hiring managers, policymakers, stakeholders, and third parties?
- Are these definitions mutually consistent?



# Methodology

- Literature review
- Agency questionnaire
  - Implementation practices
  - Functions, ROI, challenges, issues
  - Perspective on possible changes
- Discussion with policymakers
- Text analysis of job announcements
- *Idea: simulation*



# The Federal MQ Structure

- Standards established by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM)
- Examining policies grounded in law, defined and implemented in regulation by OPM
- System designed for delegation and flexibility
- Agencies are responsible for –
  - Defining qualifying experience
  - Determining required KSAs/competencies
  - Assessing applicants





# The Federal MQ Structure

- Most standards follow a common pattern
- Standards built around the Federal Government's pay system and staffing rules

Component	Requirement
Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Three years of general experience for lowest entry level.</li><li>• One year of specialized experience for all other grade levels. (“Specialized experience” is experience equivalent to the next lower grade level that confers necessary competencies.)</li></ul>
Education	May substitute for experience at entry- and mid-level. Positive educational requirement for professional positions only.
Objective Test	None for most occupations.
Other	Biodata (achievement record) for many occupations.



# Issues and Hypotheses

- Issues
  - Limited research
  - Conflicting expectations
  - Leveraging technology
  - Aligning policy and practice
- Hypotheses
  - Risk: inconsistent definition
  - Risk: incomplete coverage of competencies
  - Risk: inconsistent assessment



# Issue: The State of the Art

- Limited research and literature
  - Focus on lower-level, “higher-n” jobs
  - More attention to selection than screening
  - Nature of MQs constrains research
  - Problematic from an I/O perspective?
- More information on process than content
- R&D driven more by litigation than utility



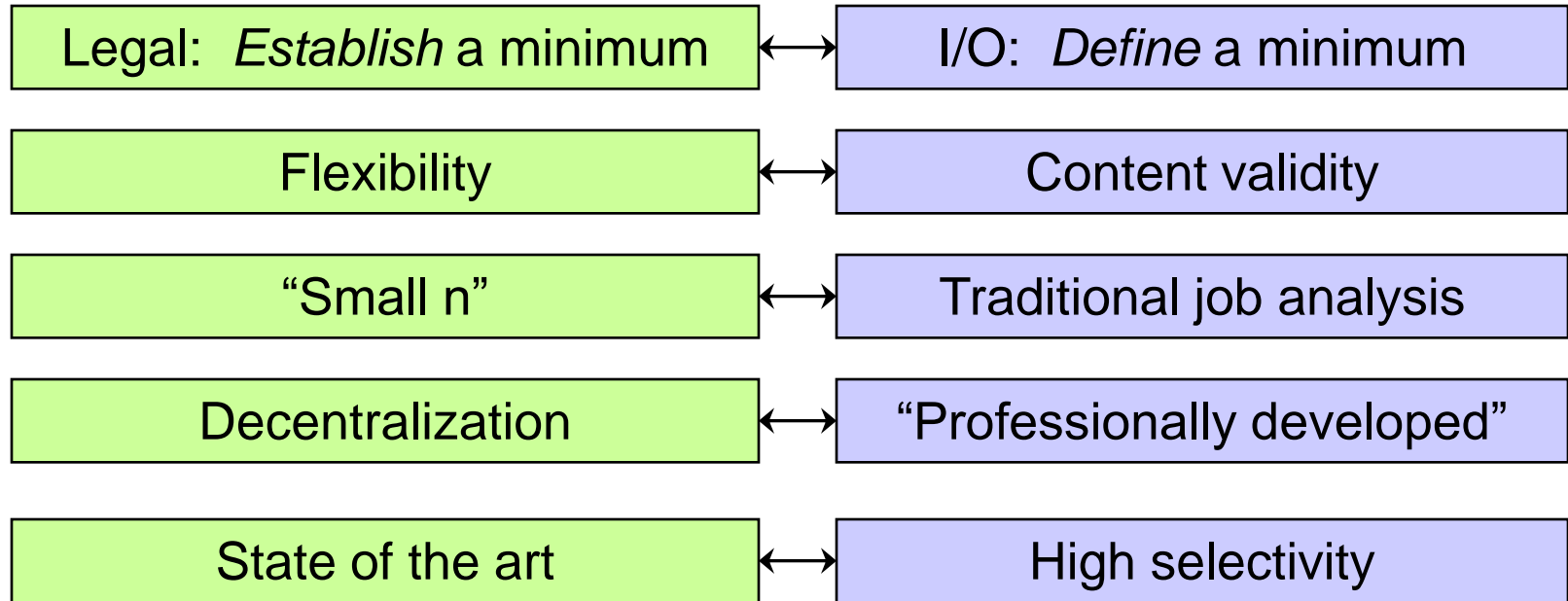
# Issue: MQs vs. “Cut Scores”

- Research often equates MQs and cut scores
- Federal MQs *function* like cut scores...
- The functional resemblance is deceptive

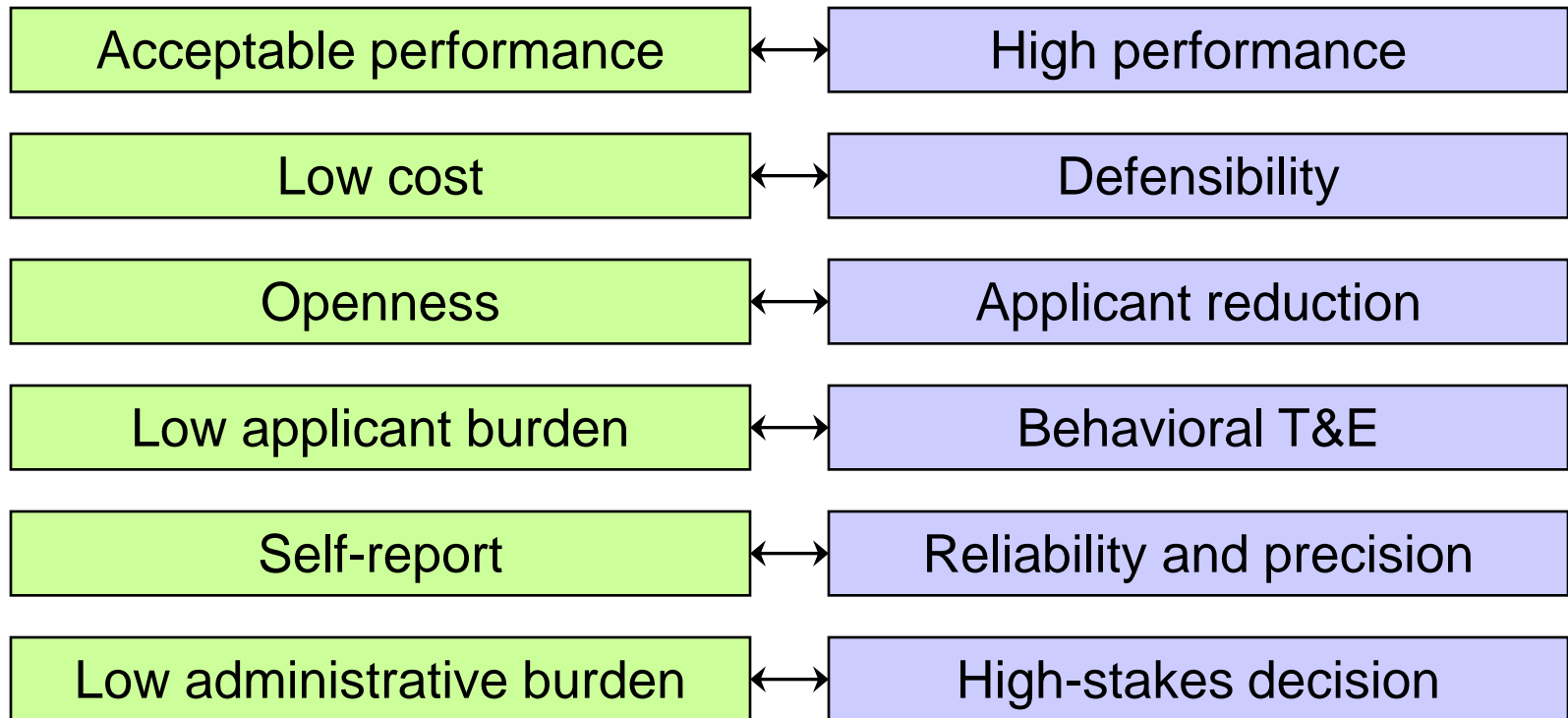
Dimension	MQ	Cut Score
Instrument	T&E self-report	Objective test
Content	Primarily technical	General/technical
Scoring	Dichotomous Rater-dependent	Continuous Rater-independent
Instrument Use	Screening	Screening/Ranking



# Issue: Conflicting Expectations



# Issue: Conflicting Expectations



# Issue: Multiple Functions

- Administrative convenience
- Sorting
  - “Screen out” those unlikely to succeed
  - “Screen in” those likely to succeed
- Communication
- Promote fairness and consistency
- Legal compliance



# MQ: High Stakes

- Important to applicants and employees
- Subject to scrutiny and litigation
- Important to agencies and hiring managers
  - Selection eligibility or priority contingent on MQ
  - MQ may eliminate or preclude selection of highly qualified applicants





# Issue: Leveraging Technology

- Technology provides potential
  - Lower cost of application
  - New assessment options
  - Transparency
- Technology creates challenges
  - Higher volume of applicants
  - Reliability and integrity



# Issue: Aligning Policy and Practice

- Separate evolution of practice and policy
- Challenges
  - Shift to knowledge work
  - Broadband pay systems
  - Technology
  - Emphasis on performance and results
  - Decentralization



## Risk: Inconsistent Definition

- Factors
  - Decentralization
  - Quality of job analysis
  - Differing understandings of “qualified”
- Indicators
  - Variation within occupations
  - Questionable “mandatory” requirements

*Example:* Selective factor for a Supervisory IT Specialist

Experience managing a staff supporting an enterprise data network, server platform, and IT helpdesk for the Federal Government.



# Risk: Incomplete Coverage

- Factors
  - Quality of job analysis
  - Difficulty of defining minimum level
  - Reliance on T&E
- Indicators
  - Poorly-defined competencies
  - Emphasis on technical competencies



# Risk: Incomplete Coverage

## *Example:* Experience requirement for a program analyst position

One year of specialized experience in the same or similar work at a level of difficulty and responsibility equivalent to the next lower pay band that has equipped you with the necessary knowledge, skills or abilities to perform successfully the duties of the position.

Creditable specialized experience includes experience such as a working knowledge of a wide range of security policies, concepts, principles, and practices to review, independently analyze, and resolve difficult and complex security problems; security program interrelationships; implementation of security policies; and conducting inspections of security programs.



*Source: Vacancy announcement for a program analyst position, posted on USAJOBS on May 29, 2008.*

# Risk: Inconsistent Assessment

- Factors
  - Raters and SMEs
  - Definition and understanding of requirements
  - Self-report information
  - Decentralization
  - Measurement challenges
- Indicators
  - Previous research
  - Experiences of employees and job applicants



# Risk: Inconsistent Assessment

“Several times I was assessed by HR personnel as not qualified at a level for a position for which I was well qualified.

When I inquired why, I was informed that the HR staff was either new or didn't understand the position.”

“I applied for a GS-7 (in my retired military career field) and came up not qualified; but then I applied for a GS-12 (same field) and came up qualified.”



Source: *Responses to 2006 MSPB survey of new upper-level hires.*

# Promising Developments

- Corporate approach
  - Workforce analysis
  - Task forces
- Cross-occupational approach
- Flexibility *plus* framework
  - Competency models
  - Assessment guidance





# Promising Developments

- Enhancements to T&E
  - Accomplishment record
  - Electronic questionnaires
- Beyond T&E: multiple hurdles
  - Objective tests
  - Structured interviews
  - Simulations
- Reengineering: process and policy



# Looking Ahead

- Practice: How can we improve MQ?
  - Development
  - Content
  - Assessment
- Perspective:
  - What is realistically possible?
  - What can we assume about MQ validity?
- Policy: How should MQ be used?



# For More Information

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