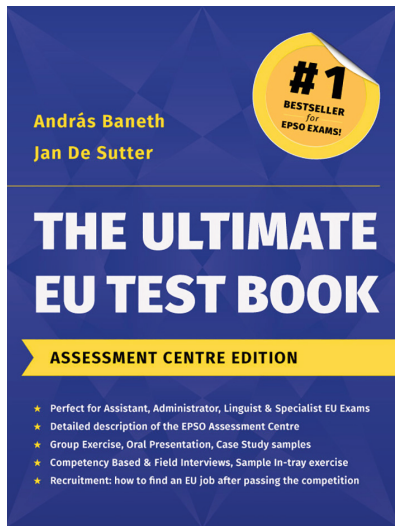
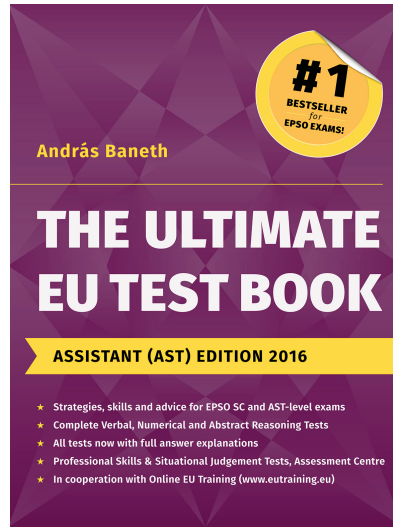
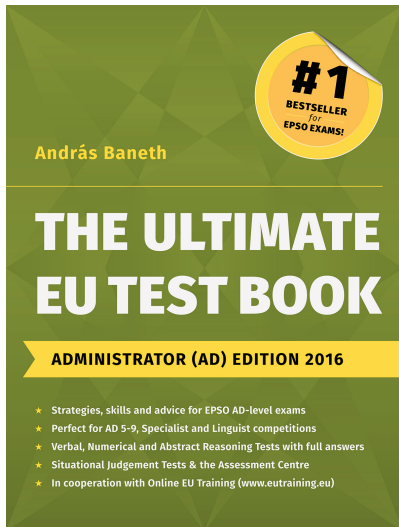


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1. The EU Personnel Selection and Recruitment Process

Introduction

There are thousands of applicants, including trainees and those already working for the EU with a fixed term contract, who attempt to pass the open (or the rare internal) competitions knowing that this is the only way to become a permanent official of the European Union institutions and bodies. EPSO, being aware of the high interest from candidates and also from its “clients”, the EU institutions and bodies, realised the need for strategic and transparent planning by introducing annual (therefore regular) cycles in 2010.

In this chapter, I provide a detailed overview of the system now in force, the candidates, the eligibility criteria, the exam steps and other relevant information with numerous practical tips that I hope may improve your chances of success.

The Selection and Recruitment Procedure

Applications in General

Owing to the exclusive nature of open competitions, EPSO cannot consider any ad hoc applications or CVs that are submitted outside the framework of an official competition, not least because EPSO itself is never recruiting new staff: it “only” selects applicants who can later be hired by EU institutions and bodies (see more details about this later). On the other hand, vacancies for non-permanent posts or a limited number of senior positions (Director level and above) that do not require the selection procedure described below are regularly posted on the EPSO website with links to the given Agency or body where applications should be submitted directly. (You can find more information about non-permanent jobs below and a list, updated daily, on http://www.eustraining.eu/eu_jobs.)

Planning and Transparency

One of the key aims of EPSO is to make selection and, ultimately, recruitment as transparent as possible by giving more information to candidates about the stages and methodology of the system, along with detailed and timely feedback about the applicants’ very own performance in the tests.

It is in this framework that strategic human resource planning is now used in all institutions, meaning that each Directorate General, Service or high-level administrative unit must signal a forecast of its staffing needs for the upcoming three or so years. This is to help EPSO to plan competitions and to try to avoid situations, such as used to occur, when a successful laureate received no job offer for months or even years. Planning is further reinforced by analysing employee fluctuations, political developments (e.g. the creation of the European External Action Service) or other factors affecting staff turnover or intake.

Increasing transparency is an ongoing effort that includes disclosing the names of Selection Board members, the aim to communicate test results and Assessment Centre reports to candidates and help candidates plan their preparation efforts by knowing a relatively precise timeline of exam schedules. This trend is certainly highly appreciated by all applicants.

Skills vs. Knowledge

The most significant element in the current selection system is the shift from the old pre-2010 knowledge-based testing to an emphasis on **competencies**. This means that multiple choice tests and essays focused on memorising “EU knowledge” facts and figures – such as the infamous “How many women Commissioners are there in the European Commission?” type of question – are completely a thing of the past.

EPSO has instead created a competency framework against which candidates are evaluated. This way EU-specific and domain-specific knowledge is only of secondary importance and these aspects are only tested to evaluate a candidate’s final suitability for the job, provided they possess all the required skills.

While this may look like a novel approach to selection, it has in fact been demonstrated by numerous studies that job performance predictability is best provided by a unique mix of skill and knowledge testing, jointly called “competency testing”.

While not contradicting the above, EPSO nonetheless wishes to select candidates who are “operational from day one” – therefore the case study and the oral presentation (or in the case of Assistants and generalist Administrators, e-tray exercise or the practical linguistic tests for Linguists), which are the items most closely related to the specific knowledge required for the job are just as important, being the main elements of testing on-the-job suitability. This is often reflected by the weighting system used in most specialist competitions (different from the generalist ones): the domain specific knowledge or skills can be attributed a 55% weight in the final scoring, as opposed to 45% for the “general” competencies. (Note that the percentages may vary from one competition to another, so it is always advised to read the Notice of Competition carefully.)

Core Competencies

According to EPSO, the following are considered as core competencies (which are required for all profiles independent of the competition):

- **Analysis and Problem Solving** – Identifies the critical facts in complex issues and develops creative and practical solutions
- **Communicating** – Communicates clearly and precisely both orally and in writing
- **Delivering Quality and Results** – Takes personal responsibility and initiative for delivering work to a high standard of quality within set procedures
- **Learning and Development** – Develops and improves personal skills and knowledge of the organisation and its environment
- **Prioritising and Organising** – Prioritises the most important tasks, works flexibly and organises own workload efficiently
- **Resilience** – Remains effective under a heavy workload, handles organisational frustrations positively and adapts to a changing work environment
- **Working with Others** – Works co-operatively with others in teams and across organisational boundaries and respects differences between people

- **Leadership** – Manages, develops and motivates people to achieve results (only for Administrator grades)

For senior or management-level posts (usually AD9 and above), one or two further competencies may be identified for specific job profiles or competitions, depending on the analysis of the given position. The above general competencies are always tested by two different exercises to ensure their validity and reliability as organisational psychologists and human resource experts have created a specific method to ensure the above quality criteria. (For more details on what each competency means and how it is measured, see the final chapter of this book.)

Duration

EPSO has tried to streamline and professionalise the selection procedure as much as possible. This in practice means that instead of ad hoc competitions, **exams are announced each year on a regular, cyclical basis**, complemented by exams for Specialists based on a need basis. The annual cycles usually start with the announcement of **Administrator** exams in March, followed by the publication of exams for **Linguists** around July, and closing with the call for application of **Assistants** in November or December, though recently this timeline has suffered some delay. It is nevertheless essential to check the EPSO website for the latest information on the schedule as changes in policy or priorities may always happen.

The duration of each cycle is planned not to exceed 9 months from announcement until the publication of the reserve list, which still means that the actual recruitment may take longer. In any case, it is possible to plan ahead your preparation as it is fairly clear what type of competition is to be announced and when.

On a related note, it is advisable to focus your efforts on only preparing for the given upcoming exam phase (pre-selection or Assessment Centre) and not the entire procedure as such from the very beginning.

Soon-to-be Graduates Welcome

The “cut-off date”, meaning the date by which a candidate must meet all eligibility criteria, especially that of possessing a degree or other qualification, is often moved to a later specified date instead of the application deadline for a given competition. This is true for most of the Administrator and Linguist exams, though not necessarily for Assistant profiles. However, always check this requirement in the Notice of Competition to ensure that you are eligible for the exam.

Take a practical example. EPSO announces a competition in March 2016. The way the system works means that if you are a graduating student and you expect to receive your degree in June 2016 but the EPSO exam, where a university degree is a pre-requisite, has its application deadline in April, you can still apply, as long as the degree is obtained by the time of the date specified. The rationale behind this recent change is to offer soon-to-be graduates the opportunity to apply in their last year of studies, thus broadening the scope of the candidate pool – a great step forward.

Candidates with Special Needs

European Union institutions have always been keen to respect the principles of equal access and non-discrimination given this policy’s pivotal place in the EU Member States’ legislation and obviously inside the institutions themselves. Therefore in the EU selection procedure candidates with special needs, such as seriously limited eyesight, physical disability or other issues that require adaptation in the test centres, should notify

EPSO well in advance to make sure that both their access to the testing and the scoring of their exams are adapted to their condition. Supervised one-on-one tests or other measures may exceptionally also be made available to encourage such candidates to apply.

Chances of Succeeding

The total number of applications per year is very high – it is regularly above 40,000 for the generalist Administrator exams, for instance. (Numbers tend to be lower for Assistant competitions.) This should, however, not discourage anyone from applying as this figure is less intimidating once put into perspective. Consider that about 10% of these applicants never actually show up at the test centre (they change their minds, were not really serious about sitting the exam, could not make it due to personal reasons etc.) and thus your chances are already higher.

Further, the pre-selection phase is very challenging for those who see verbal, numerical and abstract reasoning questions for the first time at the exam centre. Those having done their “homework” to prepare well are therefore immediately at an advantage. This is the stage at which most will drop out.

On average, at the Assessment Centre stage of the exams 1200 Administrators, 600 Linguists and 300 Specialists are tested in a year along with 900 Assistant candidates. (These figures fluctuate due to the changing needs of the EU institutions and the exams announced in any given year. Moreover, staff numbers are being cut by 5% in the coming years, which also has an impact on the intake of new staff. Nonetheless, due to staff turnover, retiring and other reasons, EU institutions still hire about 1000 or more new staff each year.)

The above figures also mean that there is intense competition at the pre-selection phase (varying considerably among the profiles, which is discussed further below). It also means that it is not enough to just pass – you should aim for the highest possible score to do better than others who also reach the pass mark. This is primarily true for the pre-selection phase as those candidates who win through to the Assessment Centre are measured against the pre-established competencies and only afterwards are they measured against each other. Note, however, that for Specialist profiles, you usually only need to reach a 50% score on the abstract, verbal and numerical tests, though this often depends on the number of applicants for the given competition.

Competition and Sifting-in

In the EPSO system, the concept of “**sifting-in**” is used for most **Specialist competitions** (though for general Administrators and for most Assistant profiles the eligibility is slightly more flexible): this means that Specialists are required to fill out a so-called “**talent-screener**”, a questionnaire about their professional experience and qualifications that are relevant to the field of the competition. EPSO selection board members then check these answers and award points for each answer, usually on a scale of 0-3.

Pre-selection tests with proper ranking of the top candidates are then organised only if there are more than X times more eligible candidates remaining even after setting a pass mark (or cut-off score) on the basis of the points awarded in the talent screener, which by definition eliminates many candidates. If, however, there are only a handful of suitable candidates, the abstract, verbal and numerical reasoning tests that they will be required to pass will be part of the Assessment Centre and not used as a pre-selection test. Moreover, candidates will only need to pass with a minimum of 50% score – and they are not ranked on the basis of their performance in these tests as long as they reached the pass-mark (the final ranking being based on other exercises in the Assessment Centre, i.e. their domain-specific and general competencies).

As a general rule when pre-selection tests are used, the Selection Board of the given

competition will be looking at the overall results and the number of candidates, and then determine the threshold score above which all candidates are considered for the next phase. This does not mean that all those having scored above this limit will be admitted to the Assessment Centre; however the Selection Board will examine their formal qualifications and eligibility to make sure they are fully eligible for an EU job.

This also means that **you must consider carefully which exam profile to apply for**. For example, if you have a qualification in human resource management and relevant professional experience, you can sit an Assistant exam and maybe also an Administrator exam (if your qualification is a university degree), and may also be eligible for a Specialist exam if that fits your profile. Similarly, if you are an economist who considers that, based on the earmarked figures disclosed in the Notice of Competition (published on EPSO's website and in the Official Journal), you have more chances in the Economist sub-profile than in the Public Administration one, you are free to choose either one as long as your degree and other formal criteria make you eligible for both.

Let's consider an imaginary but practical example. Depending on your profile, you may look at the Notice of Competition and discover that EPSO plans to create a reserve list of 200 Public Administration profiles and 80 lawyer profiles in the framework of an Administrator (AD5) competition. If you have a legal background, you are thus eligible to compete in either of the two categories.

While at first glance it might seem logical to apply for the one where more people are taken and thus your chances seem higher, practice shows that far more candidates apply in the "generalist" Public Administration profile – which changes the equation. If we assume that 12,000 people apply in the Public Administration profile and 3000 people apply for the lawyer one, your chances are 200:12,000 compared to 80:3000 for the lawyers, therefore the latter is the smarter choice. The only problem in this logic is the lack of actual statistics: nobody knows exactly how many applicants will apply until the deadline is up; therefore this is a unique mix of logical reasoning and chance.

Another aspect to consider is the long-term repercussions of your choice: not only will your exam profile determine the required professional knowledge but it will also affect your recruitment prospects once placed on the reserve list. It is for obvious reasons that EPSO creates sub-profiles and specialist profiles in the selection process: if an expert on environment law is sought, those on a lawyers' reserve list may have better chances of being offered a job than those on a Public Administration list (though this is not a formal rule and depends a lot on other external and individual factors as well). Important to note, however, is that *de facto anyone* can be recruited from ANY reserve list as long as their personal profile and the function group (Secretary, Assistant or Administrator) matches the specific vacancy's requirements, though EU institutions try to respect an internal policy of not "poaching" candidates from other reserve lists than the one from which they are meant to recruit.

Deciding on which exam profile to sit is therefore a tough decision for many, given its repercussions on the chances to succeed. Nevertheless, **you can apply for an unlimited number of competitions** (provided the Notice of competition does not specifically exclude this). As long as you are aware of these aspects, you can evaluate the position better for yourself – this will, in fact, be your first numerical reasoning practice exercise!

Feedback and Complaints

When discussing feedback and complaints, it must be borne in mind that given the significant number of candidates, both are handled in an automated way in the first place until human intervention is required.

Feedback (on test results) is only given in an automated format for the pre-selection phase while those who take part in an Assessment Centre are given more comprehensive feedback in the form of a written report called a "**competency passport**", which is

provided for everyone regardless of whether they passed or failed. EPSO also often requests feedback online or immediately after the computer-based test on screen, so as to improve its procedures.

Only well founded and serious complaints can be taken into account by the Selection Board, for the above reasons. This also means that individual cases are always examined by the Selection Board or exceptionally by EPSO as a body. Moreover, complaints can only concern the lack of respect for the exam rules or other administrative procedures and they can hardly ever relate to “revision” of the scores or exam results. As an example, if you missed the pass mark by one point, you cannot argue in favour of leniency or flexibility unless there was an error in one of the exam questions and it must be “neutralised” for all candidates (more on this below). Another scenario when your complaint may be substantiated is when an exam rule was not respected, e.g. your relevant qualification was not accepted by the Selection Board even though the issuing university is accredited and recognised by your Member State.

As mentioned above, the first place to lodge a complaint with is the Selection Board where strict deadlines apply (usually within 10 days from the communication of the results), but both the Ombudsman and ultimately, the Civil Service Tribunal may deal with the case. While the Ombudsman can only deal with “maladministration” (this term refers to a situation when an EU institution or body fails to respect the exam rules or procedures – as opposed to individual exam results or evaluations of the Selection Board), the EU Civil Service Tribunal does examine individual cases on their merits but acts only as a second level judicial review body after the Selection Board has refused your formal complaint. It must nevertheless be borne in mind that these are long and cumbersome procedures that are only worth the effort if you are truly and reasonably convinced that you have been discriminated against or that your application’s treatment can be challenged on legal grounds.

Another important aspect is that regardless of any failed efforts to pass the exams you can, as mentioned above, apply for new competitions without any limitations. If you do not pass an exam, EPSO does not retain your scores or keep a file on your results, therefore **you can start with a “clean slate” if you decide to have another go at passing the exams**, and you may even apply in parallel for multiple competitions (provided you meet the eligibility criteria and there is no clause in the Notice of Competition forbidding this).

The Selection Boards

Selection Boards have traditionally been composed of EU officials who volunteer to take part in such tasks. Their background, motivation and interests vary greatly which ensures objective and fair treatment based on strict guidelines that each of them must follow. Selection Boards, including most assessors, are still chosen from among volunteering active and even retired personnel, though some expertise, especially in developing multiple choice tests and administering the exams in various locations around the world, is now provided by external contractors. EPSO has been trying to professionalise the Selection Boards by extending the scope of their members’ assignments for several months or even years instead of using them on an ad hoc basis, thus ensuring the accumulation of more insight and knowledge on their part, and also by providing proper training before their assignment commences.

Members of the Selection Boards generally perform the entire administration of an exam while being independent from EPSO and, legally speaking, they are the ones who are solely responsible for the administration of a competition and not EPSO. Each competition has its own Selection Board, which takes on tasks such as preparing the tests, admitting candidates on the basis of their files or marking the exercises. In a case brought before the European Court of Justice, a candidate in the 2010 Administrator exam challenged the Selection Board’s ability to control and supervise the computer-

based tests created and run by an external company. He won the case, requiring a re-run of the 2010 Administrator exams in 2013. This case demonstrates the importance of the Selection Board and their duty to supervise all elements of the competition.

You, of course, **may never approach a Selection Board member** for any additional information other than that formally communicated to you, even though the board members' names are always made public on EPSO's website for reasons of transparency. Some candidates think that a quick online search to find the professional background of board members could help identify their favourite topics (e.g. if a member works in DG Competition of the European Commission, it may have some bearing on the questions they ask), though this is rarely the case especially since the Assessment Centres have a very different approach in testing candidates.

Venues and Costs

The **pre-selection exams take place all over Europe** and in several other locations around the world. Where citizens of all Member States are eligible for a competition (which is the normal situation), there will be exam centres in each country's capital, and in case of bigger countries, also in other large cities.

As almost all exams under the EPSO system are administered on computers, exams are generally held over a certain period of time at the designated centres.

Candidates are required to pick and book a date and venue online that suits them most within this period, though you must be very careful in your first choice as revisions or changes are almost never allowed after the booking period is over (the very few exceptions may include issues such as childbirth or medical events).

After you validate your application (i.e. submit it formally online), booking will be made available shortly thereafter. The minute the booking is opened, be sure to sign up as soon as possible given that places tend to fill up fast, and to avoid any last minute internet blackout or server crash that may prevent you from securing your place in time.

No contribution is made towards any travelling or subsistence expenses associated with the pre-selection phase of the exam. As these exams take place in your own country or at multiple venues elsewhere in the world, travelling from your home to these centres is always on your own budget.

For the assessment phase, you will be given a specific date some time in advance with limited or no option to amend it unless compelling events prevent you from attending and you can duly justify the reason.

Assessment Centres are located centrally in Brussels though exceptionally and only for lawyer-linguists, there is an Assessment Centre in Luxembourg too. Candidates who need to travel there are reimbursed for their travel costs and also given a daily subsistence allowance for hotel and food costs. The specific rules are always communicated in advance either as early as in the Notice of Competition or later to those who actually make it through to the assessment phase. The underlying principle is that nobody should suffer any disadvantage in attending the competitions due to budgetary issues. The same rule of equal opportunities applies for those flying in or travelling to a specific job interview unless a telephone or videoconference is a feasible alternative.

Motivation

Before applying, it is useful to reflect on what factors motivate you in wanting to work for an EU institution. Usually it is a mixture of various considerations – such as the desire to work on international affairs, the opportunity to travel, getting an attractive salary and benefits, having an interesting and varied job, speaking and learning foreign languages, job security etc.

Being aware of which factors are the most important for you personally can help in identifying which profile to apply for – and it should also help in the structured interview, if you get to the Assessment Centre, when assessors try to find out more about your personality. “Being part of something larger than yourself” is a vital aspect that you may also emphasise in your application’s motivation section.

The Candidates

It is very hard, if not impossible, to outline a “typical” candidate profile given the large number and diverse backgrounds of applicants. However, I have formed the impression that most of the serious applicants have five things in common. They:

- Are interested in EU affairs, committed to European integration and wish to work for a “good cause”
- Have a solid knowledge of at least two foreign languages
- Are flexible and willing to work abroad in a multi-cultural environment
- Have a strong motivation to study for and pass the exams to get into the EU institutions
- Understand and accept that EU institutions are different from the private sector inasmuch as they are a hybrid of a diplomatic corps, an international organisation and a government administration that is based on a hierarchic model

The above qualities will also be looked at by assessors if only on an indirect or informal level. EU institutions deal with such a wide variety of issues that you can certainly find the job that best suits your interests and personality if your motivation is right.

Age

There is no limitation on an applicant’s age (minimum age is determined by the requirement of a degree/diploma or work experience, therefore it is never formally spelled out). Obviously the EU is keen on ensuring a level playing field in terms of candidates’ backgrounds, ensuring equal opportunities for all based on merit, regardless of whether they belong to any particular religious, sexual, ethnic or other minority, social segment or age group.

Whatever your age, you will be required to pass a medical check that will serve as a benchmark for your social security and health insurance file before taking up an EU job. This also serves to ensure that you are physically capable of doing the job you are to be required to perform.

Quotas

It is frequently asked whether the EU institutions apply a quota system for allocating posts to a certain number of officials from each Member State.

In fact, the Staff Regulations provide that officials are to be “recruited on the broadest possible geographical basis from among nationals of Member States of the Union”. This reference to “the broadest possible geographical basis” explains the special competitions in recent years e.g. to select candidates exclusively from Croatia based on their recent accession to the EU, but such targeted competitions are the exception, not the rule.

Apart from such special circumstances, where new Member States are starting from a base of zero, the “broadest possible geographical basis” provision in practice means there is an ongoing effort to maintain an allocation of posts that more-or-less reflects the proportion of each Member State’s population in the EU as a whole. This is true for all

grades, including senior management. Yet, despite this principle, there are no hard-coded quotas for Irish or Cypriot or any other citizens given the merit-based competition system. Natural imbalances therefore always exist and they could only be challenged by the introduction of specific staff allocations, which would then likely infringe upon the principle of non-discrimination based on nationality. This is certainly not an easy issue to handle politically as it touches on the very essence of the principles guiding European integration.

Language Rules

One of the most common misunderstandings regarding EU competitions is the language regime: what is the exact meaning of the so-called first and second language? In fact the **first language** refers to your **mother tongue, as long as it is an official EU language**. The reason why this latter point needs to be specified is because a Lithuanian candidate, for example, may have Russian as their mother tongue but that cannot be considered as their first language since it is not an official EU language.

In some cases, especially for enlargement-related or Linguist exams, the candidate's citizenship or the given exam's specific language profile automatically determines the required first language. Examples would be competitions for Croatian Administrators and Assistants requiring the first language to be Croatian; or having French as the compulsory first language for translator exams in the French language. In other instances you are free to choose your first language as long as the above rules on citizenship and the official EU language requirements are respected. Thus, for instance, if you have Luxembourgish citizenship, your "first language" may well be French or German as Luxembourgish is not an official EU language.

It is important to note that "mother tongue" can also mean that if you have a perfect command of a language that you "learned" – and if you are confident that your speaking and writing is close to perfect in that language, you can indicate it as your first language. For example, if your citizenship is Slovak but you speak Greek perfectly, and you wish to apply for an exam where one of the first language choices is Greek, feel free to do so. But bear in mind that your second language must also be at a high level.

The **second language** is in fact **your first foreign language** and it almost always must be **English, French or German**. However, for Linguist exams (and sometimes for certain Assistant exams) the second language is usually the one for which candidates are sought. For example, if EPSO announces a Linguist exam for Bulgarian translators, the first language is required to be Bulgarian, the second language may be any other EU official language, and there may be a third language (in fact, second foreign language) requirement as well. Note that I did not mention any Bulgarian citizenship requirement here as the goal is the perfect command of a language regardless of which EU citizenship you may have. This is a fundamental rule in the system: the citizenship requirement is almost always decoupled from the language requirements.

EPSO now provides for abstract reasoning, verbal reasoning and numerical reasoning tests to be done in your first language. This shows that the aim of such tests is not to test your linguistic knowledge but to assess your psychometric reasoning skills, which can be done best in your "EU mother tongue". Situational judgement tests and other tests (e.g. domain specific tests for Specialists, Assessment Centre exams and others), however, are in English, French or German.

Once recruited, AD level officials will also need to demonstrate their ability to work in a **second foreign language** (their "**third language**") before their first promotion, though many candidates have already shown this ability at the exam if such an option was available. In any case, always be very mindful which language(s) you select when signing up for the exam, as you would certainly not like to decode French abbreviations in your test if you had intended to take the exam in English!

Another crucial piece of advice to bear in mind is that once you know which language you will be assessed in (i.e. the choice for “second language”; in case of linguists/interpreters, your first language will also be tested), read all preparation materials only in that/those language(s). Needless to say, French, German and all other names of EU institutions, abbreviations, programmes and concepts may differ significantly from each other, and you certainly do not wish to mix up the European Council with the Council of Europe because of a language issue.

Formal Criteria

As a candidate applying for EU exams, you must meet certain formal (objective) criteria. These, as a general rule, say you must:

- Be a citizen of a Member State of the European Union (though exceptions might occur as in the case of enlargement-related competitions)
- Be entitled to full rights as such a citizen (e.g. no legal limitations as a result of criminal acts or other issues) and meet the character requirements for the duties involved
- Have fulfilled any obligations imposed by the laws on military service (only relevant for those Member States where such service is compulsory, and even there you may prove that you were exempted from the service)
- Have a thorough knowledge of one of the official languages of the European Union and a satisfactory knowledge of a second (this is the minimum requirement but further linguistic prerequisites may be set out in the given Notice of Competition as also mentioned above)
- Have the sufficient minimum education and/or work experience as set out in the Notice of Competition

These formal criteria are required for all profiles, regardless of the specific provisions of an exam announcement; meeting these does not lead to passing any stage but their lack certainly leads to non-eligibility or if discovered later, disqualification from the exam.

The Profiles

The EPSO system comprises five main job categories generally referred to as **profiles** – Administrators (AD), Linguists (AD), Assistants (AST), Secretaries (SC), and Specialists (AD or AST). These are summarised in the table on the opposite page.

Choosing a profile is determined by both objective and subjective factors: depending on your qualifications and work experience (which are “objective” facts you cannot change overnight), you may be limited to only one “choice”; it may nevertheless happen that you are formally eligible for multiple profiles and it remains your individual choice which one to sit for. For example, a lawyer with three years’ experience and fluent knowledge of three languages might be eligible for all the profiles, including Specialists (lawyer-linguists).

Multiple Applications

A general approach taken by many candidates is to apply for all competitions they are eligible for, this way increasing their chances. This is in fact a highly recommended strategy though you should be very careful not to apply for two exams in parallel that are mutually exclusive **nor should you create two accounts (profiles)** on EPSO’s website, because this will lead to disqualification from the competition.

Such rules are usually indicated in the Notice of Competition and are limited to the

	Administrators (AD)	Linguists (AD)	Assistants (AST) and Secretaries (SC)	Specialists (AD or AST)
Minimum Qualification	Degree (min. BA level or 3 years of studies, EPSO may require it to be related to the chosen sub-profile, e.g. Audit)	Degree (min. BA level or 3 years of studies)	Relevant high school diploma or post-secondary qualification (a minimum of 3 years study-related work might also be required)	Same as for ASTs and ADs
Work Experience	None (AD5); 6 years (AD7); 12 years (AD9) (exception: see Specialists' column)	None (AD5); 6 years (AD7); 12 years (AD9)	None to 3 or 6 years, depending on the qualification (AST3 and above and SC1 and SC2 unless relevant diploma available)	Same as for ASTs and ADs (with possible exceptions, e.g. AD7 lawyer-linguists may need only 3 years of work experience instead of 6)
Type of Qualification (in many cases, though not always, qualifications are eliminatory, so make sure to read EPSO's Notice of Competition carefully)	Arts, Law, Economics, Political Science, Statistics etc.	Language Studies, Interpreting	Clerical Studies, Arts, Finances, IT, Technical skills etc.	Lawyers, Linguists, Engineers, Scientists, Doctors, Veterinaries

Important note: the terminology relating to qualifications varies greatly from country to country – what is called a “degree” in one country is a “diploma” in another, and so forth. For a country-by-country list of what EPSO regards as examples of qualifications corresponding to those required by the Notices of Competition, see http://europa.eu/epso/doc/diplomes-fortheweb_en.pdf

Please note that the above table is for information purposes only and the actual requirements may differ; please always consult EPSO's official communications for up-to-date informatio

sub-profiles of a given exam. Thus an Administrator (AD5) or Assistant (AST) competition in the annual cycle may have multiple domains such as Public Administration, Law, Economics, Audit, Finance and Statistics, where candidates are required to pick only one of these options. Apart from the risk of being disqualified from both, it is also technically impossible to choose two domains at the same time given the features of the online application form. If in doubt whether you may run parallel applications for different competitions (for example an AD or AST exam and a Specialist exam), better to ask EPSO than lose out on both counts.

Month(s)	Administrators	Assistants and Secretaries	Linguists	Specialists
0	Notice of competition + self-assessment	Notice of competition + self-assessment	Notice of competition + self-assessment	Notice of competition + self-assessment
1	Online registration	Online registration	Online registration	Online registration
2-4	Pre-selection: verbal + numerical + abstract reasoning tests + situational judgement tests	Pre-selection: <u>AST</u> : numerical + abstract + verbal reasoning tests + situational judgement tests + accuracy tests + prioritising and organising tests <u>SC</u> : verbal reasoning tests + accuracy tests + prioritising and organising tests + language comprehension tests	Pre-selection: verbal (in 2 or 3 languages) + numerical + abstract reasoning tests	CV sift and "Talent Screener" (if the No. of candidates exceeds a specified threshold, abstract + verbal + numerical reasoning tests are also used in this phase)
	Intermediate test (e-tray)			
5-7	Admission + Assessment Centre: case study + group exercise + oral presentation + structured interview	Admission + Assessment Centre: <u>AST</u> : professional skills test + in-tray + case study + group exercise + structured interview <u>SC</u> : document processing + drafting skills + in-tray + structured interview + IT literacy	Admission + Assessment Centre: practical linguistic tests (translation or interpreting from the source language/s) + structured interview + oral presentation + group exercise	Admission + detailed case study and/or domain specific interview + structured interview + group exercise (+verbal + numerical + abstract reasoning tests, if not used at pre-selection, no minimum pass mark)
8-9	Reserve lists/recruitment	Reserve lists/recruitment	Reserve lists/recruitment	Reserve lists/recruitment

The Exam Procedure Step-by-Step

Having overviewed the above general principles and hints, we can now move on to the phases and possible pitfalls of the EPSO system.

As seen in the above table, the system comprises up to five main phases:

1. Notice of Competition, Self-Assessment, Registration
2. Pre-selection Phase (first round of exams)
3. Intermediate exam (newly introduced e-tray test for AD generalists)
4. Assessment Centre (second full round of exams)
5. Reserve List, Recruitment

Below I have tried to provide an introduction to each of the stages and tests, along with some practical advice. Later chapters in this book provide very detailed coverage and practice materials for the critical pre-selection phase, together with an overview of what those who get through to the Assessment Centre will face.

Phase 1: Notice of Competition, Self-Assessment, Registration

The Notice of Competition

As mentioned earlier, the Notice of Competition (NoC) is a special administrative notice addressed to all EU citizens and it is therefore published in the Official Journal of the EU both in print and online. It is important to underline that the NoC is the only official source of information, therefore if you see any contradicting or different interpretation in the press or on a website, make sure to check the original authentic source which is always referenced on EPSO's website.

The NoC is a rather extensive document that sets out all the formal eligibility criteria, language requirements, deadlines and other practical arrangements linked to the exam. Just as important, the NoC contains a wealth of information that you can use to your benefit by reading it attentively, such as the size of the reserve list (so you can estimate your chances and thus decide which sub-profile or domain to apply for after analysing the earmarked number of applicants to be accepted for the assessment phase and how many people are to be placed on the reserve list).

The basic "job description", also detailed in the NoC, is particularly interesting as it is not only an indication of what sort of tasks you would need to carry out once employed but you can also deduce lots of hints about the topics to cover when preparing for the domain-specific parts of the assessment phase, especially the case study.

Below, by way of illustration, are extracts from the **Notice of Competition for a general Administrator competition (EPSO/AD/276/14)**, where the main aspects of the role are described.

AD 5 is the grade at which graduates begin their careers as administrators in the European institutions. Administrators recruited at this grade can undertake, under supervision, three main types of work in the institutions: policy formulation, operational delivery, and resource management. We are particularly looking for candidates with a potential for career development.

The general role of administrators is to support decision-makers in fulfilling the mission of their institution or body.

Their main duties, which may vary from one institution to another, include:

- devising, implementing, monitoring and control of programmes and action plans,
- managing resources including staff, finances, and equipment,
- assisting decision-makers by means of written or oral contributions,
- drafting policy analysis briefings,
- external communication as well as internal reporting and communication,
- relations with external stakeholders and with the Member States,
- inter-service and inter-institutional coordination and consultation regarding policy,
- coordinating working groups set up by the Member States, the institutions and other external stakeholders,
- drafting contracts, preparing calls for proposals and invitations to tender, and participating in evaluation committees for monitoring selection procedures and the allocation of proposals.

It is crucial to understand and analyse every detail provided in the NoC to make sure you can gain valuable insights. This also helps you avoid seemingly evident pitfalls that might lead to disqualification (such as a requirement to submit a certain certificate or sign a submitted document) – you would be surprised to know how many people get rejected on formal grounds by accidentally overlooking a date, a provision or a prerequisite

Self-Assessment

Self-assessment as a tool is widely used in international organisations and multinational private sector companies and EPSO makes use of it as well. The objective is to ensure candidates realise what EU jobs are really about and dispel misconceptions or misperceptions at the earliest stage. This is hoped to result in a reduction in non-eligible applications and candidate frustration and so to decreasing overhead expenses related to the organisation of exams caused by registered applicants not showing up or refusing job offers because they had a very different idea of what working for the EU means.

Self-assessment, which is not to be confused with the talent screener used for Specialists, is non-eliminatory, meaning that you cannot pass or fail based on your answers.

Registration

Registration is done exclusively online on the EPSO (EU Careers) website at the start of the procedure, which also means that you will not need to hand in any proof, paper or document at this stage – you only need to make an honest declaration. The first step is to create an **EPSO account or profile**, which is an online personal profile where your correspondence with EPSO's contractual supplier will take place. If you change your postal or e-mail address during the procedure or any other contact information becomes obsolete, make sure to update your online account immediately.

If, after registration, the confirmation e-mail does not arrive in your inbox within a few hours, check your spam or bulk mail folder as it may have been misfiled by your e-mail application; should you still not receive anything, ask EPSO for technical assistance. Make sure, however, that you do not register twice as it may lead to potential disqualification if other signs show you had second thoughts when doing so.

As in all other steps of the competition, make sure to re-read all input you provide, as a wrong click with your mouse can lead to sitting the exam in a different language than intended, or an error in choosing your citizenship from a drop-down menu may even result in you being refused for the pre-selection. Finally, never leave anything to the last moment as many candidates may rush to complete their account in the last few days of application and it may cause service interruptions or outages and prevent you from securing your place – which is every candidate's worst nightmare!

Phase 2: Pre-Selection

Having taken the above steps and provided that you meet all formal eligibility criteria, you should receive an official invitation to the pre-selection phase, communicated to you in your online EPSO profile. Once this eagerly awaited message arrives, you should start planning seriously your preparation as the booking period may open straightaway and the exam be imminent.

Once the booking is open, you can choose a venue and a time from the available exam centres and time slots. If you live outside Europe, you can choose an exam centre outside the Member States; EPSO has extended the reach of exam centres to other continents via international test centres in China, the USA and elsewhere, which is a welcome devel-

opment (though it does not necessarily apply for all exams, e.g. for the Croatian exams, test centres were only available in Europe).

When choosing an exam centre, make sure you are fully aware of the logistical issues: print the map of its location, find out which public transport goes there on the exam day, make sure that no strike or service interruption is foreseen for that day, and have a fallback plan in case you are running late, such as the phone number of a reliable taxi company.

My general advice for test-takers is to start practising as early as you can; preferably straight after deciding to sit for an EPSO exam. Even though you will not need any EU knowledge in the pre-selection phase, competition is still fierce and you must achieve the highest possible score in demanding psychometric tests. (Note, however, that for certain Specialist competitions, the “pre-selection” phase is the talent screener, and the psychometric tests are part of the Assessment Centre.) This book teaches the basic skills you need for these tests, with plenty of practice questions. In addition, various websites provide online preparation tests and courses, and a number of companies offer training in Brussels and elsewhere in Europe.

I strongly advise creating a concrete study plan where you allocate sufficient time for the upcoming weeks and months for practice, revision, simulation and preparation. Simply saying “I’ll find the time whenever I have nothing else to do” will not lead to tangible results, as watching the next episode of *Game of Thrones* will always seem more fun than dealing with rhombuses in abstract reasoning quizzes.

Scoring

As opposed to the system commonly used in French competitions and exams, there is only one correct answer for any given test question except for situational judgement tests (see below).

A small but very important piece of advice is to read the question extremely carefully to avoid overlooking words such as “not” in a question that reads “Which of the following is not an EU policy?” I have been told more than a dozen times that a certain question in the previous editions of this book was wrong when it turned out that the readers had misread the question. This of course relates to verbal and numerical reasoning tests as much as other multiple choice questions.

Another important aspect to note is that **EPSO does not simply add up all your scores across the board to produce an aggregate mark**. You may have to achieve a minimum score, for instance 50%, in every one or some of the tests, if you are to go further, regardless of how well you do in aggregate; alternatively, it could be that while the results of two tests are combined another is considered on its own. Thus, to give an example, you may find that if you do brilliantly at abstract and verbal reasoning but don't make the pass mark on numerical reasoning, you could be failed for that reason alone. Similarly, the situational judgement test may be eliminatory as a stand-alone, and the pass mark for situational judgement tests is usually 24 points out of 40, which is 60%.

The exact rules for scoring, how scores are weighted and aggregated, and which tests are eliminatory in their own right can and do vary between competitions, so you must be sure what rules apply to your competition – always check the Notice of Competition. Equally, it means you cannot afford to rely on doing well in just some tests – you need to get to the highest possible standard across the board.

Computer Screens

As all tests in the pre-selection phase are administered on computers located in accredited exam centres, you should be prepared for the difficulties this entails. Reading a text is always slower on a computer screen than on paper, speed being also influenced by the

font size and screen resolution. Highlighting, underlining or adding comments on screen is technically not available, therefore you need to take notes on the scrap paper or erasable slate that the exam centres provide. (This is even more relevant when it comes to the case study, which is formally part of the Assessment Centre, even if it is usually organised separately for logistical reasons.) Even though an on-screen calculator is usually available, handling it is less easy than using a physical one, especially if you could not practise such operations beforehand.

Computer-based exams do have a few advantages however. The display of the available time (which is not meant to put pressure on you but rather to help time management); the automatic registration of answered and unanswered questions (which should help you keep track of the questions); the flexibility of choosing a convenient exam day for all candidates (as opposed to having a single exam day for all candidates); and the faster (and more reliable) correction of your answers given the electronic evaluation, are among the advantages of computer based exams.

Verbal and Numerical Reasoning Tests

The verbal and numerical reasoning tests, along with abstract reasoning, are commonly known as **psychometric tests**. These are one of the most popular methods to evaluate cognitive skills and the intelligence of prospective employees. They are widely used by multinational companies and civil service recruiters around the world given their flexible application, cost-effectiveness and proven relevance to gauge candidates' skills. The relevant chapters of this book provide a full methodology and hundreds of practice exercises: what follows here is more of a description of how these tests are administered along with some general advice on how to tackle them.

Verbal reasoning tests are essentially reading comprehension tests where you are required to answer a question based on a text. A fundamental rule is to only consider information contained in the text.

Numerical reasoning, on the other hand, is a calculation exercise using statistical charts, tables and graphs, based on which you are required to find a certain percentage, figure, or decide on relative values (e.g. "Based on the table, which country had the highest birth rate in 2008?"). Questions can be tricky as in many cases no or minimal exact calculation is required given that you can simplify the riddle by applying calculation methods and shortcuts. A comprehensive toolkit is offered in the relevant chapter of this book.

EPSO has been using verbal and numerical reasoning tests for some years in its competitions and they have proven to be one of the most challenging parts of the exam procedure. The likely reason is that while EU knowledge could be memorised by dedicating sufficient time to this end, succeeding in verbal and numerical reasoning requires a completely different approach. Learning the methodology, and then plenty of practice in using it, is therefore crucial to succeed.

As mentioned in the section on languages above, since 2011 all verbal and numerical reasoning tests are in your first language (along with abstract reasoning, but there the choice of language has no relevance). Linguists can expect to have two or three different verbal reasoning tests: one in their main language (which depends on which linguistic profile they had applied for, e.g. Bulgarian translator or German interpreter); while the other two depend on the source languages available for that given exam (English, French and German have privileged status and almost always appear among the languages).

Work as hard as you can to improve your overall vocabulary in the exam's language by reading quality news websites, boost your spelling skills for complex words, your understanding of measurement units (billions vs. millions, how many litres in one cubic metre, etc.) and revise basic mathematical operations. In addition to the extensive

resources in this book, you will find tests in 14 different languages on the Online EU Training website.

Abstract Reasoning Tests

Abstract reasoning is another test type that various international employers commonly use; it is a common feature of popular IQ tests as well. Abstract reasoning is different from the other two tests as it requires no linguistic skills: there is only one main question for all tasks, such as “Which figure is the next in the series?”

Using these questions for personnel selection is practical for EPSO given that there is no need to translate the exercise into any language and also because abstract reasoning tests have been scientifically proven to be culture-neutral while effectively testing candidates’ so-called “fluid intelligence”. This latter term refers to the capability to solve new problems and understand the relationship between various concepts, independent of any acquired knowledge.

The main skill you need to efficiently resolve abstract reasoning tests is “imagination” – that is, the ability to mentally rotate, flip or turn certain figures according to a certain logic or rule. This rule is one of the main challenges of this question type as you should be able to “dissect” a figure and identify its component elements. Those capable of performing such tasks are likely to be able to cope with unknown or new situations in the workplace: this skill therefore does have more practical value for predicting actual job performance than may seem at first glance. You can find a large number of abstract reasoning test questions in the relevant chapter of this book, along with an in-depth methodology that is highly practical and applicable.

Situational Judgement Tests

Situational judgement tests (or SJTs for short) have been employed for decades by different organisations, such as the Canadian Civil Service, and companies that have wished to measure potential candidates in real-life work scenarios. The objective of SJTs is to create **realistic work-related scenarios** in which you must determine the proper course of action given the parameters and situation. In other words, the test basically asks what you would do in a particular circumstance.

An important element of SJTs is that there are no absolutely “right” or “wrong” answers when testing your judgement. Rather, judgement is about your ability to assess a given situation and make clearly defined decisions on how to proceed from there, based on your own unique set of experiences in life and understanding of the EU institutions’ culture and ethical rules, while applying a certain common sense to workplace situations.

For example, given a sample question about witnessing malpractice in your unit committed by a colleague, your reaction or response may be to confront that person first while another person may feel it is most appropriate to let your Head of Unit know about what has happened. This is therefore closely linked to the competencies that EPSO is seeking to find in future EU officials.

Since there are no right or wrong answers as such, the decision whether one answer is better than another lies in the hands of the test administrators; however, the benchmark for deciding the value of each answer is the competency list that EPSO has established and against which it evaluates candidates.

It is important to point out that while real world situations can certainly be summarised into brief sentences or paragraphs, rarely do we come across situations in life that resemble these questions precisely. As in the above example, you could be confronted with a colleague who may be stealing but who may also be a friend, or someone

with whom you are in direct competition for a promotion. Such factors would certainly influence your judgement and response.

For further background details on SJTs, how they are created, including a full sample that covers the competencies that EPSO tests with specific exercises (rather than only by observation of behaviour in assessment exercises), refer to the relevant chapters below.

Professional Skills Tests

These types of tests are widely used by assessors and recruiters around the world to gauge candidates' ability to concentrate, attention to detail and computer literacy skills. Such tests used by EPSO for **AST and Secretary (SC)** exams are prioritising and organising (planning skills involving allocation of limited resources) and accuracy tests with icons (spotting typos, misquotes or spelling errors in a large set of data, table or chart); e-tray simulations (a series of emails coming in to a simulated interface where you need to process and understand them); and for SC posts, IT literacy tests (knowledge of Microsoft Office and other computer and information technology tools).

Testing of AST professional skills is carried out in both the pre-selection phase and in the Assessment Centre. However, in the pre-selection phase the focus is on general "prioritising and organising" and "accuracy" tests which are relevant to every AST sub-profile, while at the Assessment Centre the emphasis is on specific knowledge in the chosen field of the exam.

Notification of Results

After the pre-selection phase, or in the case of Specialist profiles, after the successful sifting-in of your CV, candidates are notified both of their positive or negative results. The scores and the answers you had given are communicated to you in all cases though for practical reasons EPSO cannot disclose the multiple choice questions themselves, only the answers you had marked.

Since the number of applicants in the pre-selection phase runs into the tens of thousands, EPSO decided to require the submission of supporting documents only for those who have passed the pre-selection or were Specialists short-listed on the basis of their CV. This means that even those who have already cleared the first hurdle may not take their eligibility for the assessment phase for granted: EPSO will first of all require you to send in a completed and signed application form along with annexes listing your educational qualifications and if necessary, documents attesting your professional experience or other required information.

As soon as the above documents are validated and accepted, you receive an official notification in your EPSO profile that you have been admitted to the assessment phase. Shortly afterwards you will be required to confirm your presence at a given venue and date to undergo the assessment exams.

Phase 3: Intermediate Test

The intermediate test is a new addition to the EPSO selection process. It consists of an e-tray exercise for generalist AD (Administrator) candidates who have passed the pre-selection tests and made the "top cut", that is, they were among the best X number of candidates. As this exam is another filter to get to the Assessment Centre, it has enabled more than three times more candidates to pass the pre-selection and be evaluated in this phase rather than being "selected out" earlier, in the pre-selection phase. The e-tray is covered in detail in the *The Ultimate EU Test Book Assessment Centre edition*.

Phase 4: Assessment

Generic Assessment Centre Exercises

An Assessment Centre is used as the **second full round of exams** for Administrators (including Linguists) and Assistants and Secretaries (SC) (but in most cases, the first round for Specialists). At the Assessment Centre several trained observers called “assessors” evaluate your performance throughout half a day or a full day of exercises that have been developed specifically for this purpose. EPSO uses multiple types of exercises based on their competency framework: the idea is that each competency (listed above, such as “Delivering quality and results”) will be tested by two types of exercises to make sure that the observations are valid.

The reason why different competencies are tested by using various exercises for various profiles is that EPSO has linked certain competencies to each profile and therefore only wishes to test you on those that are relevant for your field. Thus, for example, Assistants will not be required to give an oral presentation as their job roles will not include giving presentations.

The core generic exercises used at the Assessment Centre are:

1. The Case Study (not for SC)
2. The Group Exercise (not for SC)
3. The Structured Interview
4. The Oral Presentation (AD only)
5. The e-Tray (or in-tray) exercise (AST and SC only)

More is said about each of these exercises, as relevant, in the final chapter of this book on “Facing the Assessment Centre”.

The above exercises are generic in the sense that they test personal behaviours and qualities in ways which are relevant to the wide range of roles that candidates may be called on to undertake in the course of their career.

In addition to these “core” elements of assessment, for more specialised roles the competition will involve other tests focusing on specialised knowledge.

Professional Skills Tests

Linguists’ Skills Tests (Translators, Interpreters, Lawyer-Linguists)

For the Linguist profiles, the pre-selection tests include two extra verbal reasoning tests that concern their two “source” languages. The main verbal reasoning test is in their “target” language (which is the language of the chosen exam profile, e.g. for Spanish interpreters it is Spanish). More information on the languages is given in the section above on this topic.

As for the professional skills tests, they are similar to a classic language exam, comprising the translation of two 500 to 1500-word-long texts from each of the source languages into the target language (for translators) and a “live” interpretation with the above language combinations (for interpreters).

Translators and interpreters have various exercises in the assessment phase such as the structured interview, group exercise, oral presentation and the above-mentioned professional skills test. These exercises do not necessarily cover EU affairs, though they will certainly cover a wide range of topics such as economics, history or politics, given that these issues feature prominently in the day-to-day work of an EU translator or interpreter.

For lawyer-linguists the translation of a legal (though not necessarily EU) text is faced in the Assessment Centre phase, along with verbal, numerical and abstract reasoning tests and other competency tests (structured interview, group exercise). Traditionally, lawyer-linguists have not been allowed to use a dictionary for their translations, which made this testing more challenging than that of translators. Interestingly and importantly, lawyer-linguists have an extra test in the Assessment Centre which covers their general knowledge of and linguistic skills related to national (!) law. The reason for this test is not so much the knowledge of national paragraphs and regulations but the requirement to be familiar with the judicial and legal terminology that is a pre-requisite to performing a lawyer-linguist's job well.

Specialists' Tests

It is important to note that for Specialists, the pre-selection exams described above may be moved into the Assessment Centre stage, depending on the number of applicants.

As a general rule, EPSO says that if the number of Specialist applicants (e.g. nuclear scientist, cohesion policy expert, competition lawyer etc.) exceeds X times the number of places available on the reserve list, it will organise a pre-selection round for them as well. If not, then these exam items will be included in the assessment phase.

Moreover, Specialists need to go through an online pre-screening questionnaire, called a talent screener. The purpose of this is to identify their work experience in the given field, whether they have had publications in academic journals, done research in the field and many other declarations that can help the Selection Board evaluate Specialist candidates' suitability and eligibility for the post. (Even though these are declared on "word of honour", they may be checked by requesting supporting documents any time in the selection process or at recruitment.)

Should a large number of such candidates remain even after the pre-screening, a pre-selection round may be organised to filter candidates further. For all other profiles (Administrators, Linguists, Assistants and contract agent posts), a pre-selection phase is the default rule without any in-depth online screening other than basic formal eligibility criteria.

Specialist knowledge is tested in the assessment phase mainly in the form of a practical exercise, a special domain-focused and targeted interview, and/or in the framework of the case study. This latter is closely related to the exam profile and the sub-profile or domain that the candidate chose at the time of application.

Specialist knowledge is tested for all profiles, as no capable candidate who otherwise lacks the proper knowledge of the chosen field can be recruited, given EPSO's wish that all new officials should be operational from "day one". Moreover, even Specialists need a solid understanding of EU institutions, procedures and stakeholders, which can add valuable points to your performance in the assessment phase of the exam. For instance, if you are familiar with the overall context of the EU's environmental policy, know which institutions and agencies are involved, which are the formal rules to enact policy in this field, which European associations and NGOs are taking an active part in influencing decision-makers and what the strategic thinking is on this policy's future, you are immediately in a position to make more out of the group exercise, the case study or the oral presentation than many other candidates who lack such knowledge would be able to do.

Assessment of Heads of Unit

The assessment for Head of Unit and Director posts has traditionally been carried out via an Assessment Centre. Potential Heads of Unit should prepare along the same lines as

Administrators, even though the competency model against which they are evaluated is somewhat different, having a strong focus on management-related issues. This means that questions testing the candidate's skills in variously managing people, time, teams, finance, operations and conflict feature prominently in the structured interview and possibly impact other exam items such as the group exercise and the case study as well. Moreover, candidates for these exams are advised to be familiar with the EU Financial Regulations and general principles of handling budgets and funds.

Assessment Report

After both the Assessment Centre and other forms of assessment, a report with a competency passport will be drawn up by the assessors to evaluate you against the pre-established competencies. This also means that first and foremost you will not be judged against other candidates but rather against the objective behavioural criteria EPSO seeks in candidates. The ranking of suitable candidates will come afterwards and will be influenced by your performance in professional knowledge metrics.

Based on a streamlined and structured methodology, assessors draw up a report that summarises your performance, along with your strengths and weaknesses. For the sake of understanding and to draw conclusions, you can find two such sample reports in the final chapter of this book, one relating to an imaginary candidate who performed well and one for a candidate who was not deemed to be suitable for the given profile.

EPSO provides this report to all candidates regardless of whether or not they were successful in the assessment phase. This report can add a lot to your self-development as it provides a comprehensive analysis of your personality traits as observed during the assessment. It can also be very helpful in deciding which of your skills or competencies may need to be developed.

Phase 5: Reserve List, Recruitment

For those candidates who successfully passed both exam stages and survived other potential pitfalls in the procedure, a notification including the words "we are happy to inform you" arrives in their virtual EPSO account's mailbox. This also means that your name will be published in the reserve lists that appear in the EU's Official Journal and on EPSO's website (unless you opt out) and your competency passport, based on the above assessment, will be added to your profile once you take up employment. Those who did not succeed this time should not despair as they can re-apply for any later exam with the advantage of being familiar with the working methods of the system.

Validity of the Reserve List

Once a reserve list is published, it is always clearly indicated when it expires, meaning until which date you can be recruited from it. However, EPSO has in practice regularly extended the validity period of a reserve list to make sure that all available candidates are recruited from it.

The idea is to have the Administrator and Assistant competitions' reserve lists valid until the next annual cycle results in a new list; for Linguists it is the same approach but instead of the next annual cycle, it will be the next competition in the same language that replaces the previous list; for Specialists, the lists are valid for at least three years as long as they still contain recruitable (available) laureates.

Flagging

Once on the reserve list, candidates (or as they are called at this stage, “laureates”) are “flagged” by the institutions. This means that your profile listed in the “E-laureates” database can be assigned different statuses (marked in colours) as follows:

- **Green:** Any institution may recruit the candidate – a candidate may receive multiple offers in parallel and can choose accordingly
- **Red:** The laureate has already been recruited or their recruitment is happening right now
- **Grey:** The laureate is temporarily not available (e.g. the person is interested in taking up a job but currently cannot due to family or work reasons)

Job Interview

Once on the reserve list, you can try to lobby for yourself by indicating your exam’s reference number and presenting your CV to targeted Heads of Unit; this, however, is of mixed effectiveness: while it works for some, it may yield no result at all for others. EPSO much rather recommends that you wait to be contacted by interested institutions or if you wish to get in touch with them yourself, they provide a candidate contact service list on their website where you may also ask for the list of internal vacancies that they might be willing to send you. Those candidates who are already working in one of the EU institutions (e.g. as a temporary agent) can have direct access to the internal vacancy list. Application to these posts is sometimes limited to “internal” candidates; however, sometimes “external” candidates are also considered if they meet the specific requirements of the post.

Finally, if you have a chance to make personal contacts, it can go a long way as you can make a good impression on a Head of Unit or demonstrate your abilities instead of depending on an impersonal message. Friday afternoons may be your best bet to manage to talk to or meet with a person in charge, but you may need to travel to Brussels at your own expense in the hope of effective networking.

Any time between a few weeks and several months, you may receive a phone call or e-mail asking whether you would be interested in an interview for a position at x or y EU institution. Always make sure your contact data is up-to-date and that you regularly check your EPSO profile as well in order not to miss such important events.

Once offered the chance to attend a job interview, it is highly recommended to participate even if the job itself may not be the most appealing. You can always decide to decline and wait for a better or different offer, but it is better to have such options than decline flatly in the first place and take a gamble. You can also gain useful interview experience and find out more about the position; you might even realise that the job is in fact meant for you.

The job interview itself is different from other parts of the selection competition as it is focused on your suitability for the specific position and it may only include some basic general EU questions. If you apply for a consumer health expert position, for example, you can expect a number of technical questions on this specific topic but nothing on e.g. the Treaty of Lisbon or the EU’s immigration policy (unless the job in question is in the Commission’s DG Home).

Your interviewers will most likely speak in English, French or German, unless you are applying for a translator or interpreter post where the rule is rather your second language (if different from the above three). Be aware, however, that questions may be put to you in any other language specified in your CV. Should you feel that you need to fur-

ther clarify matters, take care not to patronise the interviewer and that your body language is also entirely respectful.

Medical Check

A medical check is required for all new recruits; it may take place even before you know the result of your job interview. Should you not be chosen, the medical check results are valid for a few months so you will not need to re-take it if you attend another interview and you are accepted for another post. In any case, avoid the temptation of having that delicious-looking ham-and-eggs for breakfast or you risk further check-ups due to an excessive cholesterol level.

Travelling

You will most likely need to travel to Brussels or Luxembourg for the interview unless a video- or phone-conference call can be arranged at the EU representation or delegation office of your country of residence. Should you need to travel, all costs will be reimbursed and you will be given a modest daily subsistence allowance as well (based on strict formal conditions), but be prepared to receive the reimbursement only several weeks later.

Recruitment

If your interview was successful, you will be offered a job first by phone or e-mail, then formally by letter. Should this not arrive in time, make sure you ask your future EU institution's HR department or the unit in which you will work to send it to you. Generally you can agree on the starting date of employment with your future boss, so you can look for accommodation (if in Belgium, try www.immoweb.be or the European Commission's Intranet also has a fine small ads section with real estate ads) and arrange paperwork in due course.

Moving costs are paid for unless you have lived in the country where you were recruited to for more than a certain period of time (e.g. if you had done an EU traineeship at the Commission in Brussels right before you got recruited, this may prevent you from having your moving costs paid or being granted a so-called "expatriation allowance", though the rule is generally six months of residence and for traineeships, the duration is five months). The detailed rules can be found in the EU officials' Staff Regulations.

Preparation Methods

Preparing for EPSO tests is far from being an easy exercise and most candidates have had feelings of apprehension. The way of preparing for the tests is really an individual choice. You may find that simply looking at the tests' objectives and preparing on your own makes you feel confident; conversely, you may want to read text books, take web-based training courses, or actually go through instructor-led preparatory classes offered by a training centre.

Whatever method you choose, know that timing and motivation are the linchpins. As you prepare for your test, make sure to start soon enough and take it very seriously all the way. Knowing when to begin your preparation process is critical to having enough time without feeling rushed. EPSO normally publishes the timelines of competitions with plenty of advance notice, and it is strongly advised to start preparation at least two months before the exam day.

The key thing to remember is that tests are not written with the intention of catching you out. In fact they are only meant to probe your skills and competencies in various

“reasoning” exercises and assess whether you have a concise understanding of the chosen field while ensuring that you possess the right competencies at the same time.

What to Study

Regarding your EU knowledge, make sure to have a good basic understanding of the “Treaties”, meaning the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. This is something that can add greatly to your performance if you get through to the Assessment Centre and save you from using the wrong EU terminology, which, even if not evaluated, may give a bad impression, especially since the assessors are EU officials themselves who are very familiar with the topics.

A good knowledge of how EU institutions and decision-making procedures work and what the key priorities of the European Commission and Parliament are; an idea about some milestones in EU history; and some basic familiarity with the latest European Council Presidency Conclusions, key judgements of the European Courts, basic Eurostat data, and strategic policy papers such as the EU2020 programme – these are all useful for learning the specific character and vocabulary of the EU. Lastly, reading EU news on a daily or weekly basis can help you understand how a seemingly abstract or complex piece of legislation works in real life.

Preparation Resources

For the pre-selection phase, I recommend reading through this book’s concise methodology chapters and practising the exercises multiple times. You can find further resources online as indicated below and other instruction webinars and videos I have recorded and made available on Online EU Training. For the assessment phase, several YouTube videos can help you see real life examples and tips for each exercise, and this book should also help in identifying the key concepts to be aware of.

Browsing the Commission Directorates Generals’ websites for “hot” issues and checking the relevant Commissioner’s website and speeches on your topic will help you understand where to focus your attention for the Assessment Centre (especially for the case study); having a look at the various European Parliament committees’ meeting reports can also serve as time- saving and efficient tools.

Linguists can find excellent resources on the Commission DG Translation’s website regarding terminology; finding and comparing the terminology of various EU documents in different linguistic versions is also a powerful preparation method.

Having reviewed the above rules and general advice, let’s get started with the preparation!