



ONLINE EU TRAINING

PREPARE | IMPROVE | SUCCEED

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# EU Careers

## What Candidates Think & Ways to Succeed



# INTRODUCTION

“

I like EU exams because they are objective.”



“

It is hard to know how the tests are relevant for the jobs available and in fact what the available jobs are like.”

“

The selection process may be confusing, but the prospect of working on issues that affect hundreds of millions of people and to do this in a secure job for good pay is worth it.”

“

I really want to work for the EU, but I hate the fact that the process takes over a year even if you are successful.”

“

Candidates from different EU countries, coming from widely different educational systems, may have completely different perceptions of the exam, some will find the tests familiar, others strange and unusual.”



The personnel selection system of the EU is complex and hard to navigate. Candidates have very different experiences and opinions. Reading forum posts on the Online EU Training or our Facebook page, a newcomer might think that there is no common ground and that it is impossible to find the best practices for participating in EU exams.

From Augustin 2013 to October, Online EU Training conducted a large-scale survey of EU exam perceptions and best practices. The survey was filled out by many newcomers to EU exams, as well as by 'veteran' candidates who know their way around the various tests and the application process.

We have now tallied the results, drawn the conclusions and attempted to make sense of the results. We hope you will enjoy and learn from Europe's largest EU career survey!

## THE TOP 10 TAKEAWAYS

- 1 The typical EU career candidate is **BETWEEN THIRTY AND FORTY YEARS OLD.**
- 2 They come from a **VARIETY OF PROFESSIONS FROM BOTH THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTORS**, the EU job market is not an invitation-only club.
- 3 By far, the **MOST POPULAR EU CAREER PATH IS PARTICIPATING IN AN ADMINISTRATOR COMPETITION** where no work experience is required and a wide range of university degrees are accepted.
- 4 The EU is the **LARGEST AND MOST DESIRABLE EMPLOYER OF TRANSLATORS AND INTERPRETERS IN EUROPE**, and perhaps in the world.
- 5 When it comes to the tests used in EU career exams, **EVERYONE HAS THEIR WEAK POINTS AND NO SINGLE TEST IS PERCEIVED** as the biggest barrier to entry by a plurality of candidates.
- 6 The case study exercise is the **SINGLE MOST MISUNDERSTOOD TEST TYPE** in the entire EU selection system.



- 7 The interpersonal aspects of the EPSO assessment centre (group exercises, public speaking) are **DEEMED QUITE CHALLENGING** by a large number of candidates.
- 8 The application form and the scoring system are **WIDELY VIEWED AS OVERLY COMPLEX** and hard to navigate by candidates.
- 9 While the substantive aspects of an EU job are still the top factors in choosing this career, **PRAGMATIC ASPECTS ARE DEEMED BY CANDIDATES TO BE MUCH MORE IMPORTANT** than before the economic crisis.
- 10 By analysing candidate responses, EU Training website usage **TRENDS, TEST STATISTICS DATABASE EXTRACTS AND OTHER SOURCES**, an EU exam preparation golden rule seems to have emerged.

## A FEW WORDS ABOUT OUR METHODOLOGY

The survey was conducted over the course of three months, between August and October 2013 using an online questionnaire. Respondents were users and visitors of the Online EU Training website and the Online EU Training Facebook page. No reward was given for completion of the survey (aside for our heartfelt thanks) so as not to skew the results.

The questions were all multiple choice where users had to select one or more of the options provided or decide to what degree they agreed with statements on a Likert scale.

We considered it important to allow respondents to comment and elaborate on all of their responses in free text entry fields. We have found that these comment sections provide invaluable insight that otherwise could not have been gained.

We will cover the following main areas:

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# THE TYPICAL EU EXAM CANDIDATE'S PROFILE



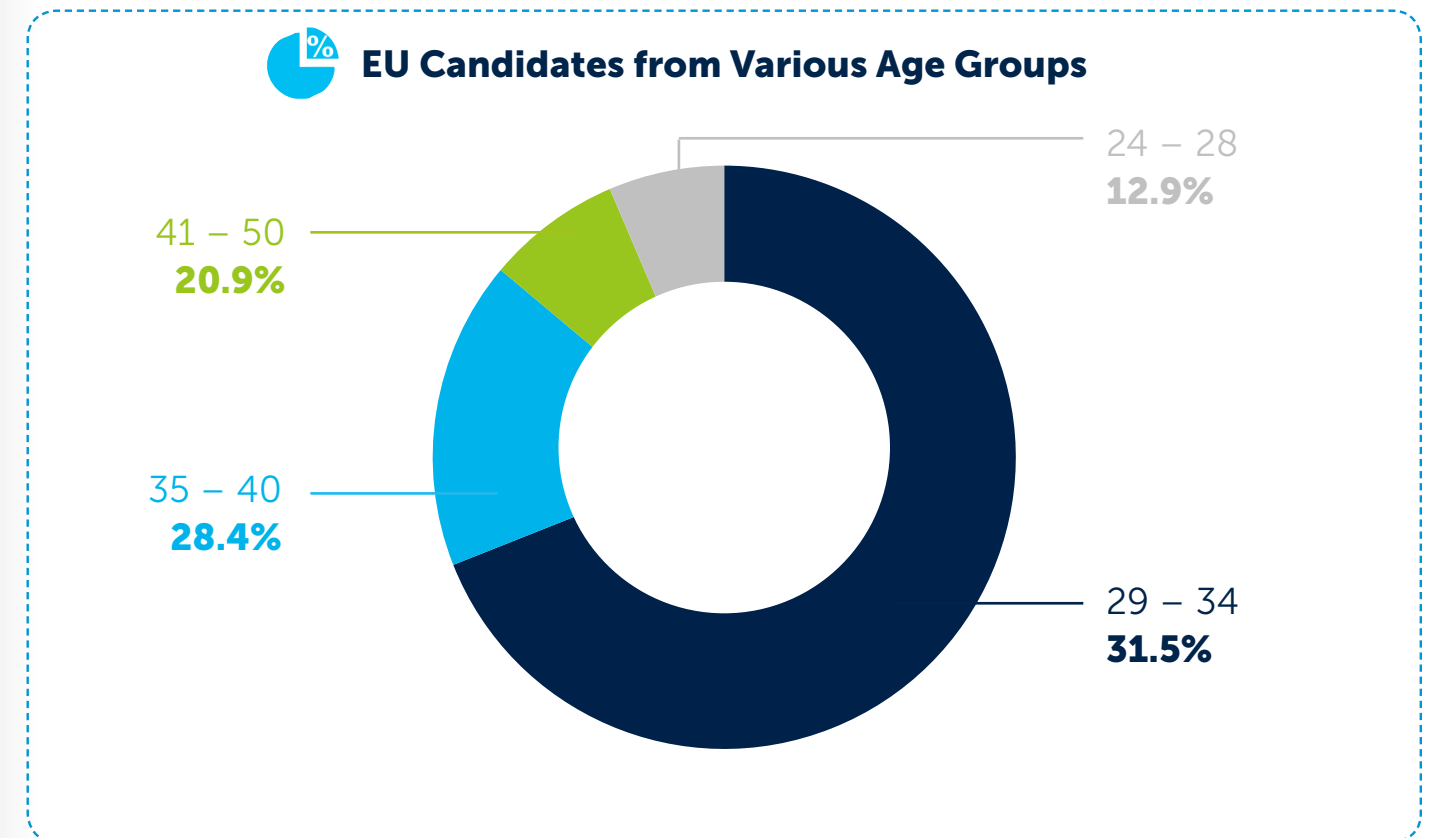
While the EU civil service is often accused of being a closed club which is almost impossible to join and where most positions are filled up internally, this is far from being true.

As we can see, a large majority (close to 70% in total) of candidates come from jobs and backgrounds outside the EU: students, private second employees, national civil servants and others. EU candidates, and therefore EU employees, have diverse backgrounds. **Here are just a few of the professions** from which we had many respondents to our survey:

UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS    LAWYERS/DOCTORS  
 RESEARCHERS    DIPLOMATS    ENGINEERS  
 SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS    UN STAFF MEMBERS  
 CONSULTANTS    TRANSLATORS

Since the EU does not allow any age discrimination, we have candidates from a range of age groups. This is further reinforced by the fact that many EU positions and competitions are open to candidates fresh out of University.

Let's see the break down of the different age groups of EU candidates fall into.

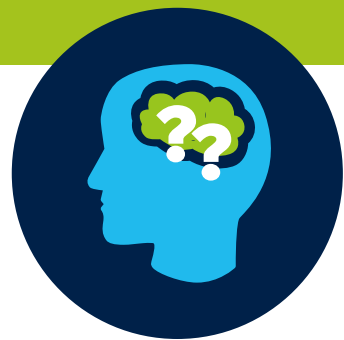


Results show that most candidates seem to develop the ambition of working for the EU at a slightly later stage in their careers. Candidates aged between 24 and 28 (whom we would call recent graduates) make up only less than one sixth of all candidates, while people between 30 and 50 represent the overwhelming majority.

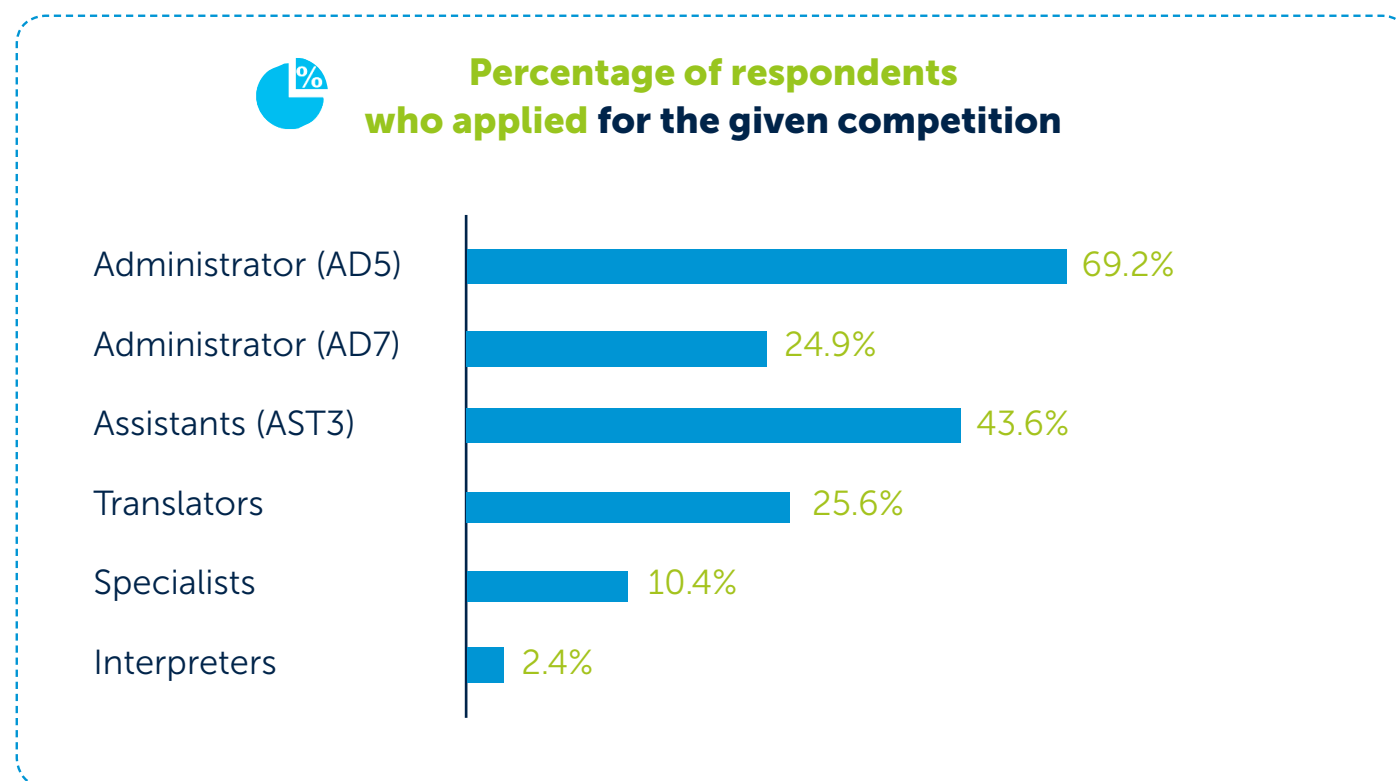
Since a large proportion of EU positions are open to fresh graduates, we can conclude that the EU has the luxury to select from experienced candidates even for junior positions.

Is this a good thing? The answer is not straightforward. While experienced candidates bring a lot of benefits, they also might experience work fatigue and demotivation in a junior position sooner than a fresh graduate. We think that the EU and EPSO could do a better job promoting this opportunity among students in the future.

# INTEREST IN VARIOUS EU COMPETITIONS



We were also interested in how attractive different types of EU competitions are.



**%** Percentages add up to more than a 100% as a candidate can apply to more than one competition.

If we correlate the results with what we know about these exams, we can conclude that **THERE ARE THREE FACTORS THAT MAKE AN EU COMPETITION ATTRACTIVE AND POPULAR** among candidates:

- **SIZE**

Large competitions with lots of places on the reserve list are perceived as offering a better chance of success (e.g., AD5 administrators, AST3 assistants).

Additional reasons for the popularity of the AD5 administrator competition are the fact that they are open to university students in their final year of studies, and that many of the profiles offered (e.g., European Public Administration or External Affairs) are open to candidates with any educational background. This takes us to the second factor.

- **LOOSER WORK EXPERIENCE AND EDUCATION REQUIREMENTS**

Competitions where any diploma is accepted and no work experience is required attract a disproportionate number of candidates (e.g., translator competitions) because they offer good opportunities to candidates whose qualifications might not be as popular in the private sector.

- **NICHE FIELDS**

The opposite seems to be true as well, competitions for specialists with very specific skills (e.g., nuclear scientists or intellectual property experts) are popular among practitioners of these fields.

The likely cause for this is the fact that there are many people who aspire to work for the EU in these very specialised areas, and the specialist exams (organised quite infrequently) are the only way for them to do so.

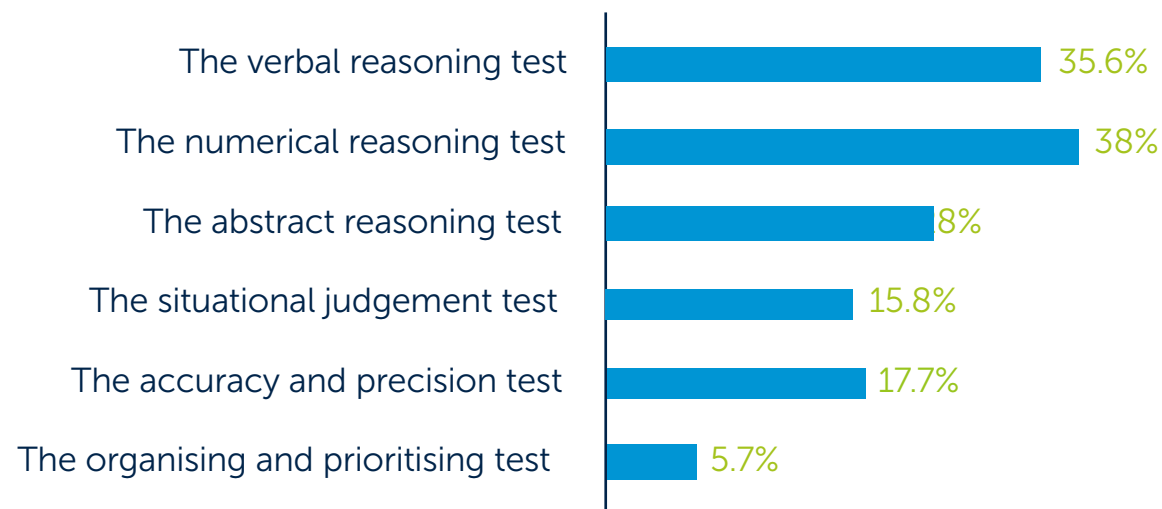
# CANDIDATES' PERCEPTIONS OF EU EXAMS



When it comes to evaluating EU exams, we asked respondents about which parts of the exams they find most difficult to deal with in each phase of the exam and what frustrates them most about the way EU competitions are organised, conducted and structured. Here are the results.



## What are the most difficult aspects of the admission phase of the exam?



As we often mention in Online EU Training webinars and trainings, the three main test types of the exam (verbal, numerical and abstract reasoning) are almost equally unpopular (or popular, depending on your mood) among candidates, while other, more specialised tests seem to cause less trouble.

Even though it was allowed to pick multiple options, those who picked one of these three test types as being the most difficult aspect barely ever marked any of the other two as well, which supports the view that almost every candidate views one of these tests as their weak spot.

This has psychological consequences as well. You should not feel discouraged if your performance on one of these tests is markedly poorer. Most candidates experience this, and at least you will have a way of targeting your preparation better.

We also asked candidates to tell us a little bit about why they feel a particular test type is the most difficult. These opinions can be very useful in assessing your own performance and experience as compared to those of others.

## VERBAL REASONING

Ambiguous statements, inaccurate translation (for candidates taking the test in a language other than English or French – these languages were developed much earlier and are therefore better tested), and not enough time to read the text passage properly were the most prominent problems mentioned.



In Online EU Training webinars, we discuss the best ways to eliminate ambiguity and evaluate the statements confidently, and we also talk about ways to decrease the time needed to interpret the passage.

## NUMERICAL REASONING

High complexity of the questions presented, misunderstanding the information in the table, losing time by making a small error in a calculation and having to start over, and unfamiliarity with the on-screen calculator were the most frequently mentioned issues.





In Online EU Training webinars, we discuss ways of simplifying the calculations needed to get to the correct answer, we talk about ways to avoid the use of the calculator almost completely and call attention to typical errors that are made in interpreting the tables and charts.

## ABSTRACT REASONING

Very tight time limits, especially for candidates with less intuition for such tests, and difficulties with noticing the logical relationships between shapes and figures are the biggest hurdles.

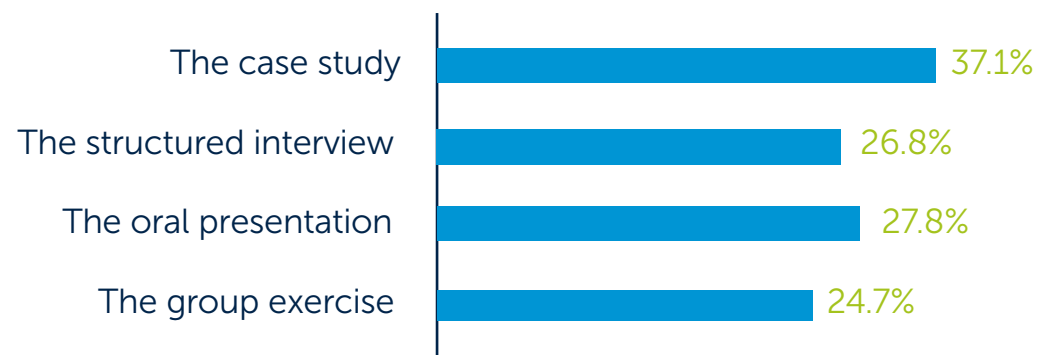


In Online EU Training webinars, we introduce a surefire way of approaching these tests. If you are not a natural who answers these questions instinctively (as many of us aren't), a systematic approach is the best way to go, with special emphasis on the types of shapes and operations that can potentially occur in these tests.

We asked the same question of those who participated in an assessment centre as well.



### Which exercise of the assessment centre do you find the most difficult?



## CASE STUDY

As we can see, the case study was named by the highest number of respondents as being the most challenging aspect of the second phase of the exam. From the text-based responses, it seems that this is because there is a lot of confusion about what the case study exercise is intended to measure.

While many candidates believe it is to test their knowledge in the field they applied for (e.g., law or audit), this is in fact only part of the picture. While knowledge in the field is sort of a pre-requisite to be able to draft the case study response and it does count toward 30% of your total assessment centre score, evaluators will actually look for abilities such as prioritisation and delivering quality when reading the candidate's essay. Together with the other exercises, these so-called general competencies count for 70% of the total score and are therefore crucial in determining success.



Keep this in mind when using Online EU Training's case study simulation feature. The evaluation you receive, prepared by a veteran ex-EPSO evaluator, will discuss in detail and score your performance in light of these competencies, so you can learn a lot about the ways in which you might need to improve.

## INTERVIEW, GROUP EXERCISE, ORAL PRESENTATION

These three components of the assessment centre were indicated by roughly the same percentage of respondents as being the most difficult ones and, interestingly, there was a lot of correlation between them as well. From the text-based responses, we believe this is due to the fact that a lot of the more introverted candidates find these exercises (where a certain degree of acting and 'public speaking' is necessary) somewhat intimidating.

Another frequent observation was how strange it is to be observed by the assessors without being able to read any kind of reaction on their faces and, especially for the oral presentation, a lot of respondents mentioned a serious lack of preparation time as well.

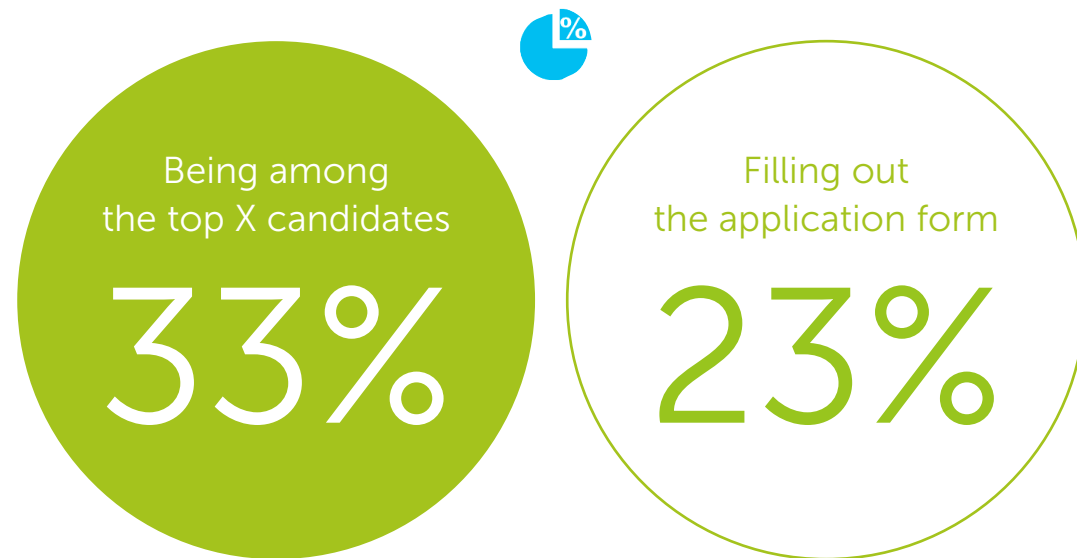




In classroom simulations organised by Online EU Training, we discuss ways to combat stage fright and various strategies for exhibiting those behaviours that are seen as positive by EPSO assessors. For the structured interview, we also discuss ways to build responses to the questions that are 'to the point' and yet shed some light on your achievements.

## Non-test-specific CHALLENGES

**Two other top issues that were mentioned by respondents are:**



We share your frustration with the requirement of not simply achieving a certain score but also having to be among the top X number of candidates in the given competition. This is a practice that was criticised by many occupational psychologists and experts, but it is the current reality of EPSO exams.

The good news is that since a vast majority of candidates do not prepare sufficiently for the exam, it is possible to give above-average performance by putting some extra effort into your preparation.

The complexity of the application form is another issue mentioned by many candidates. Our best advice is to always start this process early so you can contemplate your answers, seek advice from others, and submit everything on time.



Stuck with your application? Don't forget about Online EU Training's pledge of always providing free advice within 24 hours. Just use our contact form to get in touch with us about your questions and concerns.


## THE MOTIVATION CHALLENGE - What to write in your EPSO application?



The EPSO application form also features a selection of questions about your motivation for applying. Read our article stuffed with advice on how to answer this question.

**We also wanted to know what you think about the selection process and how it fits into a candidate's life.**

Two interesting data points that emerged are below.



<b>THE EPSO EXAM PROCEDURE IS TOO LONG.</b>	
Percentage who mostly or completely agree:	<b>88.6%</b>
<b>IT'S HARD TO FIND TIME IN MY LIFE TO PREPARE FOR THE EXAM.</b>	
Percentage who mostly or completely agree:	<b>60.3%</b>

While we completely agree that the process is incredibly long and there is a lot of room for improvement, there also seems to be an interesting connection between the above two statements.

The secret to handling the EPSO process well is to make a decision and accept that it will be part of your everyday life for the next year or so, much like household chores or work are. A similar analogy that was made by many respondents is to view the competition as you would physical exercise: it is time-consuming, but if it can develop a habit, it will seamlessly become part of your daily routine.

# CANDIDATES' MOTIVATION FOR APPLYING

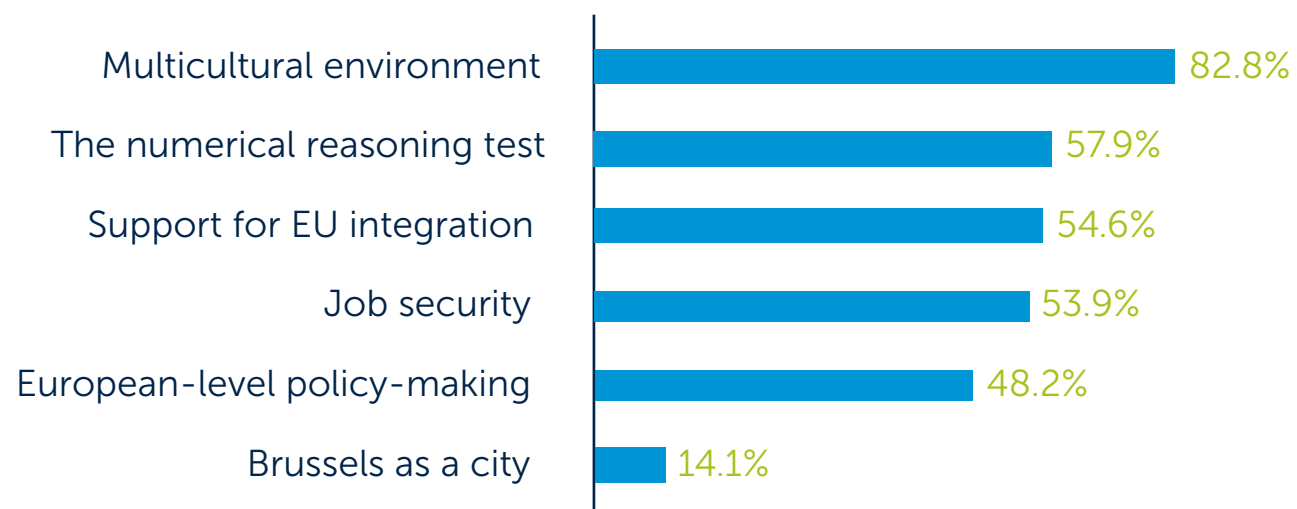



Everything that we have covered so far all points in the same direction. Due to the length of the process and the difficulty of the exam, it is crucial that you stay motivated and have a clear picture of why you are putting yourself through the competition in the first place. We asked respondents:

**APART FROM THE SALARY, what factors motivated them the most to continue the process and keep up their preparation even when they felt discouraged.**

We hope that many of you can gain new ideas from the results below.

 First, let's see the most popular responses:



 Percentages add up to more than a 100% as a candidate can apply to more than one competition.

There aren't too many surprises here, but it was interesting to see how job security gained a lot of popularity when we compared the results to those in a survey we conducted in 2007, before the economic crisis. While back in 2007, attractive salaries were mentioned by almost twice as many people as job security, the two factors are almost at par in 2013 – what a difference high unemployment can make.

**There were also very interesting responses in the comments section,** and we think that the quotes below can serve as inspiration for others as well.

"BECOMING PART OF SOMETHING THAT REALLY MATTERS".

"THE TOP EMPLOYER FOR TRANSLATORS AND INTERPRETERS ON THE CONTINENT".

"WORKING WITH LAW AND LANGUAGES IN COMBINATION".

"MERITOCRACY".

"WORKING WITH MY MOTHER TONGUE IN ANOTHER COUNTRY".



# PREPARATION TIME AND CHANCES OF SUCCESS



Every week, Online EU Training customer support receives hundreds, sometimes thousands of emails from EU exam candidates. Every week, at least a dozen people ask us the million dollar (or rather million euro) question:

FOR HOW LONG, AND HOW MUCH,  
SHOULD I PREPARE FOR MY EU EXAM?

By surveying candidates' responses, extracting a wealth of information from the Online EU Training databases (for example user statistics, average performance in relation to the exam period) and correlating this with the success rate of our users at the real exams, we think we might just have the answer.

Successful respondents spend 1 to 2 hours per day, 3 to 4 days per week preparing for the tests in the pre-selection (or admission) phase of the exam. This represents an average of 21 hours of studying and preparation per month.

Add this to the number of months spent in preparation prior to the exam, and the results are shown in the chart below. A candidate's success rate will, up to a certain point, improve as their preparation time increases.



### % Success Rate Improvement v. Prep Time



It may seem obvious to you that the more time you spend studying, the more successful you will be. However, there is such a thing as 'over-studying'—studying so much that you risk losing your 'edge' or become demotivated. This is clearly visible from the slight dip in the success rate at the 3-month mark. If, however, you can 'power through' this period, you can reach your true potential and this is rewarded by a higher chance of success.

A lot of you might say that preparing for almost 3 months to have a 24% chance of success is not that great a proposition, but think again: 24% essentially means that one in four candidates will be successful.

Compare this to recent statistics: in a typical administrator competition, there can be as many as 200 candidates for each position on the reserve list.

# INTERESTED IN EPSO ASSESSMENT CENTRE TRAINING?

**IF YOU WISH TO PRACTICE PRE-SELECTION TESTS FOR THE EU CAREER EXAMS, WE ARE HERE TO HELP:**

- **ABSTRACT REASONING** practice tests
- **NUMERICAL REASONING** practice tests
- **VERBAL REASONING** practice tests
- **SITUATIONAL JUDGMENT** tests
- **E-TRAY SIMULATION** exercise
- **ACCURACY & PRECISION** tests
- **ORGANISING & PRIORITISING** tests
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- **2+2 hour webinar on HOW TO PASS THE EPSO ASSESSMENT CENTRE**
- **CLASSROOM COURSES** with live simulation in exclusive, max. 8-person groups

