

11-5-2014

FAA Letter in Response to White House Letter Regarding FAA Changes to Air Traffic Control Specialist Hiring Process

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Brady, T., & McGuirk, G. (2014). FAA Letter in Response to White House Letter Regarding FAA Changes to Air Traffic Control Specialist Hiring Process. , (). Retrieved from <https://commons.erau.edu/publication/419>

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U.S. Department
of Transportation
**Federal Aviation
Administration**

Assistant Administrator for
Human Resource Management

800 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20591

November 5, 2014

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Dear [REDACTED]

On July 18, 2014, you submitted a letter to President Obama regarding the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) recent changes to the Air Traffic Control Specialist (ATCS) hiring process. You expressed concern with the FAA's decision to implement a single all sources hiring strategy and, as a result, you feel that it has disadvantaged graduates who successfully completed the Air Traffic Collegiate Training Initiative (AT-CTI) program, such as [REDACTED]. You also expressed concern with the implementation of the Biographical Assessment. Your letter was forwarded by the White House to our agency to address your concerns.

As you are aware, in February the FAA announced the establishment of the Interim Hiring Process, by which interested individuals applied for, were evaluated, and hired for training for ATCS positions. In response, the Agency received approximately 28,000 applications for approximately 1,700 ATCS positions.

I want to assure you that the FAA's goal in implementing the Interim Hiring Process was to ensure the Agency selects applicants with the highest probability of successfully completing our rigorous air traffic controller training program and achieving final certification as an ATCS. The Agency's training program is the primary method for ensuring we employ highly-trained controllers committed to maintaining the highest safety standards in support of the National Airspace System.

A group of unsuccessful applicants for ATCS positions have initiated a class action lawsuit challenging, among other things, the FAA's use of the Biographical Assessment. Given the pending litigation and our ongoing evaluation of the merits of likely claims, I trust you understand our sensitivity at this time about releasing detailed information about the Interim Hiring Process. Nevertheless, in an attempt to be responsive, we are providing you as complete information as possible in response to your inquiries.

The Interim Process differed from prior Agency practice for hiring ATCS primarily in two ways. First, we created a single, nation-wide vacancy announcement and a single process to evaluate and assess applicants. In the past, separate vacancy announcements and distinct processes were used to evaluate applicants based on whether the applicant met the specified eligibility requirements for the vacancy announcement. Second, an applicant had to achieve a passing

score on a new component of the hiring process – the Biographical Assessment. Upon passing the Biographical Assessment, applicants were eligible to take the Air Traffic Selection and Training (AT-SAT) exam, on which they also had to achieve a passing score. Below is a more detailed description of the Interim Hiring Process, its purpose and the process used in its development.

Summary of the New Interim Hiring Process

The Interim Hiring Process established a five-tiered applicant assessment process; applicants are required to successfully complete each step before being eligible for the next step of the assessment process:

- **Biographical Assessment** – The Biographical Assessment measures an applicant’s education, academic achievement, aviation-related experience, and prior air traffic control-related experience and achievement orientation. It was professionally developed and validated based upon years of extensive research of the ATCS occupation in accordance with relevant professional standards and legal guidelines for pre-employment selection testing;
- **Baseline Employment Eligibility Screen** – Screens for citizenship, Select Service registration, as well as minimum experience/education position-specific qualifications required by the FAA and the Office of Personnel Management’s Qualification Standard for the Air Traffic Control Job Series, 2152;
- **AT-SAT Exam** – Measures cognitive abilities and personal characteristics shown empirically to predict success as an air traffic controller, including mathematical ability, decision making, spatial information comprehension, working memory, sustained attention object projection, perceptual speed and accuracy, and planning, among others;
- **Air Traffic Organization Conditional Offer Letters** – Successful applicants receive a conditional offer to enter the FAA’s ATCS training program; and
- **Mandatory Pre-Employment Clearance** – Consists of a medical evaluation (drug test, physical and psychological examination) and a background investigation to determine suitability for employment and eligibility for a security clearance.

Those who successfully complete the above five-stage assessment then are employed as ATCS trainees. Trainees are required to pass a rigorous training program at the FAA Academy located at the Mike Monroney Aeronautical Center in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Successful completion of academy training within uniformly applicable time limits is followed by assignment to an air traffic facility, where the ATCS trainees serve on-site in a developmental training status until they achieve Certified Professional Controller (CPC) status.

Prescreening applicants on the Biographical Assessment prior to allowing them to take the AT-SAT resulted in considerable financial savings (over \$7 million), shortened the hiring cycle and helped the Agency meet its goal of hiring the applicants most likely to succeed in the ATCS occupation.

Process Used to Develop the New Interim Hiring Process

Pursuant to the requirements of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's (EEOC) Management Directive 715, the FAA conducted a Barrier Analysis of the FAA's Air Traffic Control Specialist centralized hiring process. Management Directive 715 requires agencies to regularly evaluate their employment practices to identify barriers to equality of opportunity for all individuals. Where such barriers are identified, Management Directive 715 further requires agencies to take measures to eliminate them.

The Agency's Barrier Analysis Report was prepared with the expert assistance of Outtz and Associates and APT Metrics, Inc., two independent consultancies with nationally recognized expertise in the design and validation of pre-hire employee selection tests. The analysis examined a variety of qualitative data such as stakeholder interviews, site visits, as well as quantitative data such as AT-SAT testing data and other data contained in the Agency's Automated Vacancy Information Access Tool for Online Referral (AVIATOR). Additionally, the Barrier Analysis reviewed the recommendations of the separate Independent Review Panel.

"Scoring" of the Biographical Assessment

The Biographical Assessment was scored using an automated process based on predefined question weighting. Unlike skills tests that have questions with unique correct or incorrect answers, questions on the Biographical Assessment were pre-assigned weight according to how well they predict a candidate successfully reaching full certification at a facility.

We have received questions about the scoring of the Biographical Assessment along with requests for individual scores and the score needed to pass the assessment. Disclosure of the Biographical Assessment items and the basis for scoring and weighting given to each question would diminish the validity and utility of the instrument for the selection of persons into the ATCS occupation. The release of this information would materially and negatively impact the Agency's interest in the selection of persons most likely to succeed in the occupation and undercut years of research that have been conducted on these items. Disclosure of the basis for scoring and weighting would enable future test takers to artificially inflate their scores on the instrument thereby giving them an unfair advantage in competing for a job under merit principles.

While we are unable to share the specifics of the question weighting or individual scores, we can share the minimal passing score for the Biographical Assessment was based on the professionally developed test-validation study and is set to predict that 84 percent of the applicants who passed the Biographical Assessment would be expected to successfully complete the FAA Academy and achieve CPC status.



Treatment of CTI Graduates under the Prior and Interim Hiring Processes

The FAA created the AT-CTI program to establish partnerships with post-secondary educational institutions to encourage interest in employment opportunities in the aviation industry as a whole. The AT-CTI program was not designed or intended to serve only the FAA to the exclusion of other employment opportunities in the aviation industry, nor was the program designed or intended to be the FAA's only source of applicants for ATCS positions.

The FAA has always used the AT-CTI program in conjunction with other recruitment sources when hiring ATCS. Because we implemented the Biographical Assessment as an initial screening process for the 28,000 applicants for the ATCS position, not all AT-CTI students that were eligible under prior vacancy announcements were found eligible under the February vacancy announcement. It should be noted however, that 65 percent (1,034 of the 1,591) of the individuals who received tentative offers of employment had some combination of AT-CTI schooling, veterans' preference, or some specific aviation-related work history and experience. In addition, under the Interim Hiring Process, AT-CTI students and graduates received conditional offers of employment at three times the rate of non-AT-CTI students and graduates.

While your letter did not request specific demographic information, you may be interested to know that of the approximately 1,591 applicants received tentative offer letters during the interim hiring process and approximately 904 disclosed their demographic data (race, national origin and gender). Of the 904 approximately: 650 (71 percent) were male and 260 (29 percent) were female; 544 (60 percent) were White; 153 (17 percent) were Hispanic or Latino; 92 (10 percent) were Black or African American; 57 (6 percent) were Asian; 48 (5 percent) were Multi-ethnic; 6 (1 percent) were Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander; 4 (.4 percent) were American Indian. Please note that demographic data was not accessed or used during the selection process. Indeed, information about a test-taker's demographic identity was not available to FAA decision makers involved in the applicant assessment process under the Interim Hiring Process.

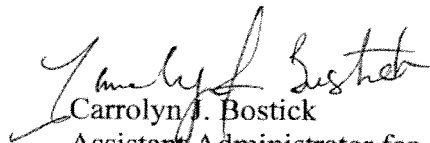
FAA's Continued Relationship with AT-CTI program

AT-CTI programs are an essential component of the FAA's multi-faceted program to ensure a predictable supply of highly skilled air traffic controllers in the years to come. The programs are important to the FAA and to the aviation industry. The FAA will continue to work with AT-CTI schools to encourage interest in employment opportunities in the aviation industry generally and with the FAA, specifically. AT-CTI students and graduates are encouraged to apply to FAA vacancy announcements in which they feel they are qualified.

In sum, we will continue to monitor our recruitment and assessment strategies to ensure we hire the best qualified individuals into the ATCS profession. Our commitment to aviation safety remains our top priority, and these changes to our hiring processes serve to enhance the effort.

If we can be of further assistance, please contact Roderick D. Hall, Assistant Administrator for Government and Industry Affairs, at (202) 267-3277.

Sincerely,


Carolyn J. Bostick
Assistant Administrator for
Human Resource Management

Enclosure
Transmitted Correspondence

cc: Washington Office