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Frequently Asked Questions Regarding Merit System Examinations

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A. Contrary to what many people believe, few – if any – state or federal personnel agencies publish comprehensive study guides for written examinations. A few agencies may release “sample” examination questions, but those (sample or generic) questions appear to be of limited value in preparing an applicant for a job-specific examination. Study guides applicants may see in bookstores and libraries are prepared and marketed by commercial publishers who have little or no firsthand information about Missouri Merit System examinations. As a result, the Division of Personnel cannot recommend any of these publications. However, some applicants may find them helpful in becoming familiar with multiple-choice employment examinations in general and thus reduce possible test anxiety.

On the average, 93% of applicants who complete a Merit examination achieve passing scores or better on the examination without having “study guides.” Although it isn’t a detailed guide, the Division of Personnel can provide applicants with an exam outline that lists the main topic areas for each job classification having a written exam.

Q. Why don’t some of the exams seem relevant to the jobs?

A. Before an examination is developed, the job classification is analyzed to determine the essential duties of the job and the knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) required to perform these duties. The examination writer attempts to assess these essential job factors – the duties and KSAs – as thoroughly as is practical within the limitations of the multiple-choice test format. Some factors, such as the ability to read and comprehend written instructions or perform basic mathematical computations, may be common to many jobs, and questions or exercises on these areas may show up in many of the exams.

Other factors, such as a knowledge of boating safety for example, may be unique to one exam. Certain factors, such as reliability, integrity, and the ability to work under stress, are too intangible to be effectively measured within the testing system and are evaluated during the hiring interview.

Whenever it is feasible, exams include “job sample” exercises. These are simplified versions of some of the actual duties for a specific job classification. Job experts from the hiring agencies review new exams for accuracy and relevance before these exams are given to

applicants. If the job experts don’t agree that a proposed question is relevant, the question is not included in the exam.

Sometimes an applicant’s perception that an exam doesn’t match the job stems from a misunderstanding of the job. An example would be the Computer Operator Trainee exam. Some applicants think that this involves desktop computers and applications such as Microsoft Word or Excel, when in fact, the job involves learning to operate mainframe or similar large and complex computer systems and subsystems.

Q. Why does the Division of Personnel have some examinations that are older than the others?

A. We all have experienced firsthand the impact of budget reductions and the redirection of resources in our agencies. For the Division of Personnel, this has meant that the examinations for jobs that have high numbers of applicants, such as office support positions, or jobs that change rapidly because of new technology have top priority for revisions.

Examinations for jobs whose duties don’t change rapidly over time are revised less frequently. The appearance and wording of these exams sometimes can seem dated. However, since the exams still measure the essential knowledge, skills and abilities required by these jobs, it is appropriate to continue using them until they can be revised. When individual exam questions are found to be outdated, or have other problems such as typographical errors, they are omitted and the exam becomes slightly shorter.

Q. Can an applicant retake an examination to try for a higher score? Can an applicant use the best score after taking an examination more than once?

A. Pass or fail, an applicant can be scheduled to retake an examination every three months. In most cases, unless an applicant was ill or had severe test anxiety the first time she or he took the exam, the score does not change significantly. Although an applicant may improve a score somewhat by retesting, it is important to remember that the rules the Division of Personnel follows require that an applicant’s score on the register must be the most recent one. An applicant cannot use a previous higher score. If the most recent score should be lower, then that is the score that must be used.

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