

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
Washington, DC 20405

HRM 9337.1
March 10, 2022

GSA ORDER

SUBJECT: Category Rating and Selection Procedures

1. Purpose. This Order provides the procedural requirements for the use of Category Rating throughout GSA for covered positions.
2. Background. The Presidential Memorandum, "Improving the Federal Recruitment and Hiring Process," dated May 11, 2010, directed that category rating be used as the method to rate and rank applications under competitive examining procedures for competitive service positions and certain excepted service positions. Category Rating is intended to increase the number of qualified candidates from which a selecting official can choose, while preserving veterans' preference.
3. Scope and Applicability.
 - a. This order applies to all GSA appointing offices and will be used when filling:
 - competitive service positions when competitive examining procedures are used (in accordance with 5 U.S.C. 3319 and 5 C.F.R. 337)
 - Pathways Recent Graduate and Intern positions in the excepted service when candidate ranking is used (in accordance with 5 C.F.R. Part 302)
 - b. The Office of Inspector General (OIG) has independent personnel authority. See Section 6 of the Inspector General Act of 1978, (5 U.S.C. App.3), as amended (Inspector General is authorized "to select, appoint, and employ such officers and employees as may be necessary for carrying out the functions, powers, and duties of the Office of Inspector General") and GSA Order ADM 5450.39D CHGE 1GSA Delegations of Authority Manual (Delegations Manual), Chapter 2, Part 1 ("the Inspector General has independent authority to formulate policies and make determinations concerning human capital issues within the [OIG]" and GSA determinations/delegations do not limit that authority). Similarly, GSA specifically recognizes that the Inspector General has independent authority to formulate policies and make determinations concerning training, employee development, and career management.
 - c. This Policy applies to the Civilian Board of Contract Appeals (CBCA) to the extent that the CBCA determines it is consistent with the CBCA's independent authority under

the Contract Disputes Act and it does not conflict with other CBCA policies or the CBCA mission.

4. Cancellation. This Order cancels and supersedes 9337.1A CPO.

5. Revisions. The following revisions were made to this Order:

a. Updated training requirements in Section 1, in accordance with the [June 2019, Delegated Examining Operations Handbook \(DEOH\) update](#).

b. Added guidance on auditing certificates of eligibles, in accordance with the [June 2019, DEOH update](#).

c. Removed reporting requirements. A report to Congress was only required for three years following the establishment of a category rating system.

d. Removed Attachment 1, which was a 2006 comparison between category rating and the old rule of three procedures.

6. Labor Organizations. Implementation of this Order as it affects employees represented by a labor organization is contingent upon meeting and completion of related labor relations obligations.

7. Signature.

/s/ _____
TRACI DIMARTINI
Chief Human Capital Officer
Office of Human Resources Management

1. Introduction. This Order outlines procedures to follow when using the Category Rating method to rate and rank applications under competitive examining procedures for competitive service positions and certain excepted service positions. Under these procedures, applicants will be evaluated solely on job-related criteria on the basis of merit, fitness, and qualifications for the position and without regard to race, religion, color, national origin, sex, marital status, political affiliation, sexual orientation, gender identity, age (with authorized exceptions) or any other non-merit factor.

2. Certification and Training Requirements.

a. HR Specialists who use category rating to conduct delegated examining activities, must complete the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) certification requirements, including training and passing a comprehensive certification (or recertification) assessment.

b. Selecting officials must be trained on the use of category rating. To meet this requirement, the servicing Human Resources (HR) Specialist should provide the information contained in Appendix A and discuss it with the hiring manager during the strategic recruitment conversation. Upon request from the Human Capital Policy and Programs Director, HR Service Center Directors must provide the type of training that was provided to their servicing organization's managers and supervisors.

3. Vacancy Announcement Requirements. In the "How You Will Be Evaluated" section of the job opportunity announcement (JOA), also referred to as the vacancy announcement, the following information must be included:

- the category rating method will be used to rank applicants;
- applicants will be placed in one of three (or four) quality categories, which will be based on their self-assessment score and HR review of their possession of the job-related competencies or knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs).
- the names of the categories; and
- how veterans' preference will be applied

4. Rating and Ranking. Within GSA's Talent Acquisition System, applicants complete a self-assessment by responding to job-related questions. Applicant responses to their self-assessments are reviewed and verified by an HR Specialist, and qualified applicants are placed in one of the pre-defined quality categories based on their score.

5. Quality Categories.

a. Under Category Rating, pre-defined quality categories are used to differentiate between the quality of the candidates. Applicants are not ranked by individual scores, but their scores are used to place them into one of the pre-defined quality categories. Quality categories are groupings of applicants with similar levels of job related competencies or KSAs. The HR Specialist, in consultation with the selecting official and/or subject matter expert (SME), will identify the job-related competencies or KSAs, as well as the job-related assessment through the job analysis process.

b. Based on the approved job analysis, the HR Specialist, in consultation with the selecting official and/or SME, will define the quality categories prior to announcing the position. Each quality category must have a clear definition that distinguishes it from other categories and be written to reflect the requirements to perform the job successfully. Factors to consider when developing quality categories *may* include the following:

- Breadth and scope of competencies or KSAs required for successful performance;
- Increased levels of difficulty or complexity of competencies or KSAs;
- Successful performance on the job; or
- Grade or level of the job.

c. Numerical scores may be used only as a basis for defining the quality categories.

d. For most positions at GSA, three categories will be sufficient to distinguish candidates. The following standard categories and score ranges must be used:

- Best Qualified = Candidates scoring between 95 - 100
- Well Qualified = Candidates scoring between 85 - 94 (well-qualified for Career Transition Assistance Plan (CTAP) and Interagency Career Transition Assistance Plan (ICTAP))
- Qualified = Candidates scoring between 70 - 84

e. If previous recruitment results show additional categories are necessary to adequately distinguish candidates, an additional pre-defined category may be used. Justification must be developed by the HR Specialist, in consultation with the hiring manager, and included in the vacancy case file to document the reasons for using the additional quality category. The following categories and score ranges must be used:

- Superior = Candidates scoring between 98 - 100
- Best Qualified = Candidates scoring between 90 - 97
- Well Qualified - Candidates scoring between 85 - 89 (well-qualified for CTAP/ICTAP)
- Qualified = Candidates scoring between 70 – 84

f. Applicants who meet the basic qualification requirements (i.e., applicants who receive a score of 70 or higher) for the position will be placed in a quality category. A “not-qualified” category may not be established. The number of quality categories and score ranges may differ among JOAs, but are limited to those identified in 5(d) and (e).

g. When using category rating to fill positions that require the Administrative Careers With America (ACWA) exam, or any assessment that results in a numerical score, quality categories can be defined by the score ranges. Candidates will be placed in the appropriate category based on their assessment score. The following is an example that shows how this could be applied where three categories are used.

Examples of Quality Categories Using Numerical Scores	
Category	Score
Best-Qualified	Between 95 and 100
Well-Qualified	Between 85 and 94
Qualified	Between 70 and 84

6. Applying Veterans Preference.

a. Preference eligibles must be placed above non-preference eligibles within each quality category and be given selection priority. Preference points are not added to assessment scores under category rating.

b. For positions, other than professional or scientific positions at the GS-9 level and above, the following preference eligibles will be placed at the top of the highest quality category:

- CPS - preference eligible with a compensable service-connected disability of 30 percent or more
- CP - preference eligible with a compensable service-connected disability of more than 10 percent but less than 30 percent

This provision also applies to candidates for the position of Contract Specialist, which is not considered “professional” for this purpose. See OPM’s Delegated Examining Operations Handbook, Appendix K, for a complete list of Professional and Scientific Positions.

c. For professional and scientific positions at the GS-9 level and above, all preference eligibles including CP and CPS are placed at the top of the quality category in which they were originally assigned, based on their assessment score.

7. Merging Categories.

a. Merging categories refers to combining the highest quality category with the next highest quality category in order to make selections from the newly merged category. Merging is optional, and can only be done if:

- There are fewer than three candidates in the highest quality category, and
- The selecting official, in consultation with the HR Specialist, makes the decision to merge.

The newly merged category becomes the new highest quality category, and all preference eligible candidates in the new category must be listed ahead of the non-preference candidates.

b. Merging can take place during the following phases of the hiring process:

(1) Before issuing a certificate, and there are fewer than three eligible candidates in the highest quality category; or

(2) After a certificate is issued, less than three candidates remain in the highest quality category due to selections and declinations, and there are additional selections to be made.

c. Once the decision whether to merge categories is made and the certificate is issued, the decision cannot be reversed.

d. The number of times quality categories can be merged is limited by the number of categories. For example, if there are three categories, you could merge up to two times.

8. Certificate of Eligibles.

a. The names of all eligible candidates in the highest quality category will be listed on the certificate, with preference eligibles listed ahead of non-preference eligibles. The names of preference eligibles may be listed in any order followed by names of non-preference eligibles listed in any order. Any time the certificate of eligibles includes both preference and non-preference eligibles, preference eligibles must be selected before non-preference eligibles.

b. If the highest quality category contains a large number of preference eligibles, making it impossible to reach non-preference eligibles for selection, a certificate of eligibles may be issued that just lists all the preference-eligible candidates.

c. If non-preference eligibles are included on a certificate, all non-preference eligibles from the category must be referred. There are no cut-offs within categories.

d. Below are scenarios that show when it would be appropriate to refer preference eligibles only or all candidates in the highest quality category:

- The number of veterans in the highest quality category exceeds the number of jobs to be filled. For example, there is one job to fill and the highest quality category contains 10 veterans and a number of non-veterans. In this case, only the 10 veterans could be sent to the selecting official because the chances of selecting a non-veteran (in accordance with the law) are minimal.
- There are fewer veterans in the highest quality category than the number of jobs to be filled. For example, there are 10 jobs to be filled and the highest quality category contains 5 veterans and 10 non-veterans. In this case, all the names (veterans and non-veterans) in the highest quality category could be sent to the selecting official.
- The number of veterans in the highest quality category equals the number of jobs to be filled. For example, there are 5 jobs to be filled and the highest quality category contains 5 veterans and 10 non-veterans. In this case, only the veterans in the highest quality category may be sent or all of the veterans

and non-veterans in the highest quality category may be sent (in case one or more of the veterans are not available) to the selecting official.

9. Selection. A selecting official may select eligible candidates from the highest quality category or from the merged category, if applicable. A selecting official may not select a non-preference eligible over a preference eligible unless prior approval to pass over the preference eligible is obtained. Procedures for passing over a preference eligible are outlined in [OPM's Delegated Operations Handbook, Chapter 6, Section D](#), and in GSA's policy on veteran pass-over and objection procedures.

10. Auditing a Returned Certificate.

a. The HR Specialist must promptly audit (within 3 days) the certificate of eligibles returned by the selecting official to ensure compliance with legal and regulatory selection procedures. The HR Specialist must also:

(1) Ensure all documentation required to support any reported job offer declinations, withdraws from consideration, and other removals is obtained; and

(2) Ensure veterans' preference was applied correctly.

(a) Within the highest quality category, the HR Specialist should observe the following in determining whether the order of selection is proper: Any preference eligible (i.e., CP, CPS, XP, TP, or SSP) is selected; or if no preference eligible is available, any non-preference eligible is selected.

(b) Disregard any eligible who was legitimately removed from consideration, including those in the categories of declined (DX), failure to reply (FR), correspondence returned unclaimed (CRU); currently employed by the agency (CE); currently employed by the agency as a temporary (or indefinite) employee (TE); and objections or pass-over requests that were sustained, including removed from certificate (RM), removed from certificate - not qualified (RQ), or removed from certificate - suitability (RS).

11. Documentation and Record Keeping. For reconstruction purposes, the vacancy announcement case file must include:

- position descriptions
- job analysis
- quality level definitions
- criteria used to distinguish qualifications/levels
- a copy of the rating schedule
- any other materials developed or used in the course of the category rating process (e.g., OPM qualification standards used, supplemental forms)

12. Evaluation of Category Rating System. Actions taken using category rating procedures may be subject to review by the OPM and/or the GSA Office of Human Capital Policy and Programs during a delegated examining or staffing program audit.

Appendix A: CATEGORY RATING and SELECTION PROCEDURES Information for Hiring Managers

What is Category Rating?

- It is an alternative to the traditional numerical rating, ranking, and selection procedures used in Delegated Examining. HR Specialists must follow OPM rules governing category rating procedures.
- Under category rating, applicants are placed in categories based on an assessment of their qualifications and possession of competencies or KSAs for the position being filled, but are not given a numerical score. Veterans are placed ahead of other candidates in the category to which they are assigned based on evaluation of their competencies for the position.
- You may select any candidate from among those referred in the highest quality category, but cannot select a non-preference eligible over a preference eligible unless procedures for passing over the preference eligible are followed and all requirements for the pass-over are met.
- The “Rule of Three” does not apply. In other words, you are not limited to choosing from among the top three ranked candidates as they are under the traditional process.
- Allows you to draw from a wider pool of candidates.

Features of Category Rating

- Applicants who meet or exceed minimum qualifications will be assigned to categories.
- All eligibles in the highest quality category will be referred to you, unless there is a minimal chance of reaching a non-veteran, then only preference eligibles will be referred.
- Within each category, preference eligibles will be listed at the top of the category.
- Preference eligibles with a compensable service-connected disability will move from the category in which they otherwise would be placed (based on the assessment) to the top of the highest quality category (except for scientific or professional positions at the GS-9 level or higher).
- You may select from among any of the applicants referred in the highest category, but preference eligibles must be selected over non-preference eligibles.
- When there are fewer than three candidates in the highest quality category, it can be merged with the next category and certified for selection. The newly merged category will become the highest quality category, and any preference eligibles must be selected over non-preference eligibles in the newly merged category.

- Procedures to pass over a preference eligible under category rating are the same as in the traditional “rule of three” process.