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**A Pakistani CSS model**

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What is the antonym of a nymphomaniac? This is a paraphrased question from an alleged CSS English (Precis and Composition) paper doing the rounds on social media. The question catches the eye for obvious reasons.

Another picture doing the rounds is of the famous CSS Essay exam. ‘Gender Equality: A popular slogan’ is one of the several essay topics provided. The instructions of the essay require ‘a comprehensive essay of 2500-3000 words’.

The CSS exam is a remnant of our colonial past. Since we make little effort to rid ourselves of our colonial hangover, the CSS exam has – unchanged – stood the test of time. While we have produced civil servants of high caliber and intellect, it is time to discover newer and better methods of recruitment to the civil service.

So, right off the bat, it is time to abolish the hand-written exam. Hand-written exams will be obsolete sooner rather than later owing to our dependence on computers and screens. The Covid-19 pandemic has already exposed us to alternative methods of conducting examinations. A better idea in a computer and screen-obsessed world is to test aspiring civil servants on their typing speed rather than hand-writing speed. By introducing screens to the testing process, we could also introduce speech-to-text dictation that will enable those with physical challenges to take part as well. Voila, access granted to more candidates. Those with such disabilities should not feel excluded from the chance to serve Pakistan.

Another factor to consider is that some people, although intellectually gifted or natural leaders, might suffer test anxiety. A writing-intensive exam (consisting of 12 exams) triggers test anxiety. Test anxiety cripples performance and thus deprives us of otherwise gifted candidates.

The existing four-step process of written examination, medical test, psychological test, and viva voce (the famous CSS interview) should make way for the following procedure.

First, establish the requirement of an undergraduate degree with two years of documented and relevant work experience or a graduate degree (Masters) relevant to the department candidates intend to join. For Commerce and Trade, Customs and Excise, Income Tax, Audit and Accounts, a degree in either economics, accounting or law. For District Management, Office Management, Postal Services, a degree in either public administration, law, public policy or human resources. For Information, a degree in either journalism, law or broadcast journalism. For police service, a degree in criminology or law. For the Railways, a degree in public administration, economics or logistics. For Military Lands and Cantonment, a degree in either real estate or public administration. And for Foreign Service, a degree in International relations coupled with speaking level fluency in a foreign language of choice.

After the degree requirement is satisfied, a cognitive abilities test, consisting of multiple-choice questions, should be conducted to further screen candidates. This test is for the reasoning, perception, and problem-solving skills of aspiring candidates.

Second, candidates should submit a statement of purpose (SOP) in either English or Urdu. Urdu should be allowed because fluency in written English or spoken English should not be a test of intellect or competence. The English-only requirement for those aspiring to be in the foreign service makes sense. The SOP should indicate the candidate's desired department, the shortcomings they see in the department, and their plan to fix these. This plan should stem from their academic background and or work experience.

The problem is that those tasked with checking these statements will have inherent biases. These biases are part of the reason candidates fail to score in the comprehensive CSS essay exam (picture a self-identifying feminist candidate writing on gender equality; the grader of the essay, an anti-feminist). Therefore, the statements should be screened by artificial intelligence (AI) to eliminate bias. Corporate giants (McDonald's, Kraft Heinz, Boston Consulting Group) have started relying on innovative companies like Pymetrics, which rely on behavioral science and AI to hire. Pymetrics 'uses behavioral assessments to evaluate job seekers, the same set of assessments is used to measure the unique attributes of existing top performers. This data is used to build custom algorithms that represent success in a given role at the organization’. Theoretically speaking, top-performing civil servants will be assessed by AI and then that data will be used to scan the statements to recommend candidates with similar characteristics and potential.

The last step should be an interview that uses survival analysis and a person-organization-fit test to determine which candidates will eventually join the service. This interview type replaces the traditional CSS interview. Survival analysis is a branch of statistics that uses data to predict when certain events might occur. In this scenario, survival analysis can predict how long a person can last in the civil service given their personality type and work ethic. The candidate's personality type is determined in steps one and two.

After conducting a survival analysis, a person-organization-fit test should be conducted. Person-organization-fit is a concept under organizational psychology defined by Amy Kristof as the compatibility between individuals and organizations; compatibility of values and expectations between employee and employer.

This alternative method will help reduce the long window from administering exams to announcing results. This window is an anxious and stress-inducing time for those whose survival, in some cases, depends on joining the civil service. This could be because the civil service is seen as a means of poverty alleviation or improving social standing for candidates. It will reduce turnover in the service and ensure civil servants aim to serve the people and not self-interests. It will employ civil servants under departments where they have a genuine interest and relevant skills. It will also help weed out those who are prone to laziness, incompetence, and or corruption.

The naysayers to abolishing the current CSS exam will say: it costs too much to implement, disenfranchises those who cannot type, the proposed solutions have no evidence of working in other countries. The present colonial hangover model costs, according to Hasaan Khawar (‘CSS exams: frozen in time’, Express Tribune), heavily as in 2019-20 the FPSC spent Rs810 million for 290 CSS allocations and 1,000 other general recruitments. The average cost per recruitment turned out to be a staggering Rs600,000. Since the bureaucracy is not tech-savvy and relies on an ‘old is gold’ approach, it is unlikely that an investment will be made in AI. However, reverting to subject-specific MCQ tests that can be graded quickly using a standard OMR (Optical Mark Reading) machine which scans MCQ bubble sheets to detect answers would also be a great investment. As far as disenfranchisement goes, testing for the synonym of the word ‘bricolage’ also disenfranchises a fair amount of people.

Lastly, why is it necessary to follow the models of what is working in other countries? We have already tried to follow the Madina model, Turkey model, and Malaysia model to name a few. Perhaps it is time to create the Pakistan model of hiring civil servants: a bias and stress (for all involved) free model which recognizes that ideas can be conveyed comprehensively in 1200 words (this article’s word limit) instead of 2500-3000 words. As for the antonym of nymphomaniac – for whatever it is worth – it is unneurotic.

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