

Eligibility Technician Class Study Update

I know that folks have been eager to hear about the status of the ET and WDS classification study. There has been some fast and furious work underway since the Division of Personnel and Labor Relations (DOP) announced that the ET and WDS job classes would be studied this year. However, before providing an update, I wanted to wait until we had reached some definite milestones before reporting on the status of the study. I will try to be as brief and as informative as possible.

Background: According to DOP, a classification study is used “to establish new job classes or change the definition or distinguishing characteristics, class concepts, class series structure, or salary-range assignments of one or more existing job classes.” The last classification study for the Eligibility Technician job class occurred almost 20 years ago. While the WDS positions were established only 10 or so years ago, the changes in our business model and the similarities between the two job classes warranted including the Workforce development Specialist positions in the study.

To some extent, this study is unique because the job classes under study are limited to our department and virtually all of the positions are in our division. Unlike other studies, we will not be competing with 13 other departments and a score of other divisions to get our voice heard.

Timeline: Because the Alaska State Employees Association selected this study, under statute, DOP must complete the study with recommendations by June 30, 2010. We held planning meetings with the Division of Personnel in early August and received their proposed timeline.

Aug –Sept ‘09	Study planning meeting, Update PDs.
Oct ‘09	Designate Study Contacts (Subject Matter Experts or SME), deadline to submit benchmark PDs 10/16; deadline for all updated PDs 10/30; DOP develops and distributes tentative interview list and schedule.
Nov – Dec ‘09	In-person and telephonic interviews with SMEs
Jan –Feb ‘10	Discovery and Design Phase; DOP analyzes information collected from interviews and PDs to assess the job and class structure; draft revised class specifications for DPA review and comment; draft allocation analysis and review for agency consideration.
Mar ‘10	DOP distributes proposed class structures for review and comment
Apr –May ‘10	Allocation reviews (Closure of reclassification submissions in ET Series)
Jun ‘10	DOP releases tentative allocations and tentative salary analysis; and, if needed we can request reconsideration of specific PCN allocations.

Study Contacts or Subject Matter Experts (SME): While DOP will review and analyze the benchmark position descriptions to collect information about the positions, the interviews with staff will provide an opportunity for DOP staff to gain additional understanding and clarity about the work.

DOP allowed us a sample of 10% of our positions (about 36 staff) to serve as study contacts whose position descriptions will serve as benchmarks for the study. We selected 36 primary SMEs and 24 alternates who will represent their respective positions in the job class. Through the interview process the SMEs can help explain the nature, variety, and complexity of the work; the level of supervision required to complete tasks and assignments; what sort of guidelines control or influence how they do the work; the purpose and nature of person to person work relationships; the scope of decisions made; the consequences of error, and; the nature and extent of supervision over the work of other staff.

The regional managers worked with their leadership staff to select at least one person in their region to represent each position in the job series. Each region was allowed 8 SMEs with an additional 4 coming from DKC, Heating Assistance and Senior Benefits. As much as possible, staff was chosen from each office and unit in the division.

Based on suggestions from DOP we did set some parameters for selecting our study contacts or SMEs. We limited our selection to staff who have passed probation and who have largely mastered the duties and expectations of their current positions (e.g., long-term staff in ET nf positions, the ET I who is ready to flex, and ET IIs who are journey –level specialists). The SMEs are knowledgeable on the breadth and complexity of the duties and responsibilities of their positions and competent in the use of all the tools and resources used by the successful ET. Within the limits of rank and experience, they know the agency’s programs, policies, and the full range of our business practices. Because DOP is interested in what has changed over time about our work, many study contacts have relatively long tenure with the division. Finally, the subject matter experts are articulate, forthright, and confident communicators.

Meetings are being scheduled this week with SMEs in each region (Heating Assistance, DKC, and Senior Benefits staff will be joining one of the regions) to discuss the basics of the process and to address any questions or concerns. In addition to the interview process, the selected SMEs will review and, as necessary revise, their position descriptions.

Position Descriptions: The position description (PD) is also, of course, a critical source of information that the classifiers will use in their analysis of the job classes. The value of the PD goes beyond its use in a class study. We use them as part of our recruitment process to ensure candidates better understand our work. Supervisors and managers also rely on them to orient employees to their duties and responsibilities. The draft PDs are designed to meet all three of these requirement.

Updating, reviewing and submitting the PDs create something of a challenge. PDs for each of the over 300 positions must be entered into DOP’s Online Position Description (OPD) system. Right now, fewer than 60 ET and WDS PDs are in OPD and many of these are several years old. Our first and foremost task is to get the benchmark PDs for the Subject Matter Experts updated, reviewed and entered into OPD. This is how we are proceeding.

To facilitate the process, master PDs for each position in the job classes were drafted and are in the final stages of being tweaked. We used existing position descriptions, reviews of PDs for similar positions in other states, and feedback from DOP on initial drafts to develop the Master PDs that will serve as template for the benchmark PDs. These PDs capture the primary functional areas and duties for positions from the ET 1 nf to ET IV as well as the WDS series. A copy of the Master PD for the appropriate position will be sent to each of the SMEs for their review and comment.

As part of their review, the SMEs will note any aspects of the work that may be unique to their specific position and/or is representative of similarly situated staff in their region or office. The SMEs will also identify the relative importance of a specific functional area and the percentage of time devoted to a specific functional area of their work. Following the SMEs review, the PD will be placed into OPD and will be ready for review and analysis by DOP's classification staff.

We must have the draft PDs for the subject matter experts completed, reviewed, and submitted to OPD by no later than mid-October. The remaining 250 or PDs have to be entered into OPD by the end of October. We'll use information from the SME review to adjust the template or master position descriptions before they are entered into OPD. Once all of the PDs are online, instructions will be provided so everyone can review the position descriptions established for each PCN.

Finally, to better inform DOP about DPA, a meeting with the classification team was arranged to provide an overview of our agency and our work. Over the course of more than two hours Ellie, me, and the regional managers provided a comprehensive review of how our agency operates and the depth, breadth and impact of the services we provide to tens of thousands of Alaskans. We provided an eloquent explanation of the complexity and variety of the work, the ETs range of responsibility, and the consequences of error. We also helped to delineate the primary differences between the various positions and to address some key terms and concepts that DOP staff is likely to run into when interviewing our subject matter experts. The DOP staff left with a new appreciation of the scope and nature of our core business.

It looks like I missed out on the brevity part of the message, but I hope it was informative. If I fell short of that mark too, you can reach me at ronald.kreher@alaska.gov.