



HR Audit review of “Registrar of Lands” recruitment

Report Date: October 30th 2013
Report Status: FINAL
Distribution: Mr. Franz Manderson, Deputy Governor

Introduction

During Finance Committee on October 17th 2013, Members raised concerns over the integrity of an anticipated appointment to the role of “Registrar of Lands” in the Lands & Survey Department, Ministry of Planning, Lands, Agriculture, Housing & Infrastructure.

This report presents the independent and objective opinion of the HR Audit service who were subsequently commissioned by the Deputy Governor to review the integrity of this recruitment process.

Methodology

The review sought to assess the overall integrity of the recruitment process, including consideration of the strength of evidence in existence to support or refute the concern that:

- a. The recruitment campaign was engineered to ensure the success of a particular individual who was known personally to one of the Interview Panel members.
- b. A new requirement for a law degree or Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) membership prevented experienced Caymanians from having the opportunity to contend for the position.

The full HR Audit Services team (Manager, Mr. Andy Bonner and Auditors Mrs. Cherry Luzon and Mrs. Karen Christian) were involved in conducting the review and undertook the following actions:

- Discussion with Ministry PLAH&I Chief Officer and Appointing Officer, Mr. Alan Jones.
- Discussion with Director of Lands & Survey, Mr. Rupert Vasquez.
- Discussion with Interview Panel Members (Mr. Alan Jones, Mr. Rupert Vasquez and Acting Chief Officer of the Portfolio of the Civil Service, Mr. Ian Fenton).
- Discussion with members of staff from the Lands & Survey Department.
- Discussion with successful candidate.
- Review of documented process in accordance with standard audit programme for recruitment.

Access to information

With the exception of the inability to obtain the Finance Committee transcript which was incomplete at the time of the audit, no significant limitations were encountered relating to access to the people or information deemed necessary for conducting this review.

Obtaining the transcript would have given us access to the precise wording of the concerns raised in the House and the responses provided on the day by the Officers involved and in attendance.

Audit Opinion

Having gathered and reviewed what we considered to be the available and necessary evidence, our independent audit opinion is that:



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- The evidence suggests that the 2013 recruitment process for the Registrar of Lands was fundamentally robust, well documented and in general compliance with the recruitment requirements of the Public Service Management Law. Some areas are identified where the process could have been stronger but these are not considered to be of a magnitude to invalidate the outcome.
- We do not believe that the recruitment campaign for the Registrar of Lands was engineered to ensure the success of any particular individual, nor did we find any substance behind the suggestion that the successful applicant was known to a member of the Interview Panel to any extent beyond isolated instances of professional networking at regional conferences (which was verbally disclosed to the other members of the Interview Panel prior to the selection process).
- We believe that the inclusion of a requirement for a degree level law qualification or RICS membership did deter at least one experienced Caymanian from applying for the position, but we also believe that such a requirement is appropriate for this position. We also note that the prior evaluated job description (2003) already expressed a ‘preference’ for candidates to have a degree level law qualification and also that when the duties of the Registrar were to be undertaken by the Deputy Director (job description evaluated 2011) there was an even higher requirement with the ideal candidate expected to be a member of the RICS.

Our observations on the strengths of the general recruitment process included;

- Comprehensive and clear documentation throughout each stage of the recruitment process.
- Interview Panel members unanimous in their decision and clear on their roles and responsibilities.
- Advertised in accordance with the Public Service Management Law, yielding 27 applications.
- Applicants shortlisted against the criteria in the job description with documented commentary on why and why not people were selected for interview.
- The Interview Panel included a senior manager from the Portfolio of the Civil Service who brought both recruitment experience and independence from the Lands & Survey Department and Ministry.
- A scoring methodology developed to provide consistency and objectivity in the assessment of the interviewed candidates, and one which resulted in the preferred candidate being a clear decision after scoring significantly higher than the other applicants.
- A comprehensive overall report from the Interview Panel signed by all of its members.

“What could have been done better?” and Recommendations

Aside from the strengths, there were also some areas identified where we believe the process could have been stronger. Whilst we highlight them here and we would suggest they are drawn to the attention of the Chief Officer, PLAH&I and the Director of Lands & Survey for consideration and action in the interests of striving for excellence in recruitment practices, we reiterate that we do not consider these to be significant enough to invalidate the outcome of the recruitment process in question.



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1. The changes to the Registrar of Lands job description may affect the grading of the job. It should have been submitted to the Portfolio of the Civil Service for formal re-evaluation prior to advertising.

Recommendation: Submit the revised job description for re-evaluation to confirm the pay grade.

2. Although 5 applicants were shortlisted, only 2 really met the criteria for the post with the other 3 being invited with a view to assess their suitability for a possible deputy role. Shortlisting 2 suitable candidates did meet the requirements of the PSML, but when 1 withdrew her application just before the interview date, only 1 potentially viable candidate remained. At this stage it would have been prudent to strengthen the line-up of interviewees by embarking on a further round of advertising and / or considering any ‘border-line’ applicants who marginally missed being shortlisted (in our opinion a further 3 applicants, none of whom incidentally were Caymanians, could have been taken for interview from amongst the applicants).

Whilst news of the vacancy was arguably communicated world-wide by virtue of its inclusion on the Government and Lands & Survey Internet sites, targeted advertising could have been extended beyond Jamaica to ensure a stronger field of applicants, especially given the key role and the known absence of any Caymanians on the advanced stages of succession planning for the role.

Recommendation: Whenever it is practical to do so, extend the literal requirement of the PSML to shortlist at least 2 suitable candidates to ensure that at least 2 suitable candidates are actually interviewed.

3. The Interview Panel is expected to have a detailed understanding of the job being recruited to, and the Recruitment Panel could have been strengthened with the inclusion of the prior Registrar of Lands who remains in current employment at the Lands & Survey Department. Although a senior member of the Portfolio of the Civil Service was included on the Panel to provide an extra degree of strength and independence, he lacked the detailed knowledge of the job being recruited to and would therefore have been better as a 4th optional member of the Panel and not the 3rd mandatory member.

Recommendation: Ensure that the composition of the Interview Panel is as strong as possible given the requirements of the PSML.

4. No documented references were obtained to support the successful applicant (Although a PSML requirement, this is a common audit finding and not unique to this case).

Recommendation: References should be sought to support the preferred candidate unless (s)he is well known to the Interview Panel.

5. There was an extended delay in informing the 1 internal Caymanian applicant that they had not been shortlisted. Other unsuccessful applicants were informed on 9th May, but the internal Caymanian applicant did not hear that outcome until late July after the interviews had taken place.



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Recommendation: Unsuccessful applicants should be informed as soon as practically possible after that outcome is known.

6. The job advertisement stated that the contract is ‘renewable pending satisfactory performance review’ which creates an impression that renewal is guaranteed with satisfactory job performance. Whilst the risk of this misunderstanding is mitigated by the actual Employment Agreement which contains the standard ‘no presumption of further fixed-term employment’ clause, problems could still arise.

Recommendation: Ensure that the selected candidate is clear on the possibility of further fixed-term employment and refrain from using the ‘renewable pending satisfactory performance’ phrase in future advertisements.

Andy Bonner

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