

Selection Criteria – The STAR Model

By A.J. Bond

This article outlines the importance of using the STAR Model when applying for public sector roles, and offers a few tips to ensure your selection criteria response hits the mark.

When applying for a public sector role there is a very good chance you will be required to address a number of essential selection criteria outlined in the position description.

Addressing public sector selection criteria is very different from applying for a private sector role, where the submission of a resume and cover letter are sufficient to get you across the line.

When applying for public sector roles a resume and cover letter are often not enough. You will generally also be required to address the stated selection criteria separately.

The failure to submit a selection criteria response, even for an otherwise perfect candidate will very often result in an application not getting past initial screening. Great significance is placed on selection criteria responses in the public sector, some statistics indicating application weighting upwards of 50%.

So what is 'selection criteria?' Selection criteria is normally listed in the position description, and outlines the core criteria that a candidate is expected to have and importantly upon which candidate selection will be based.

As part of the application process, the candidate is expected to address the selection criteria - i.e. provide a formal written response to each of the selection criteria listed, which will help to highlight the applicant's suitability for the role.

A formal response to selection criteria came about as a means to validate whether an applicant has the skill, experience and capability to adequately perform the role. An applicant who can demonstrate their ability to meet selection criteria will be short listed ahead of those who fail to do so.

While there can be variation around the number of criteria listed or expected word limits, there is a very strong preference across the public sector to use the STAR Model when addressing selection criteria.

The public sector has broadly adopted the STAR Model as the de-facto standard for validating selection criteria feedback. It is broadly considered to be the most appropriate method to evaluate applicant merit.

So what is the 'Star Model?' For each prescribed selection criteria item listed, the applicant is expected to frame their responses according to the following STAR Model inputs;

Situation - Outline of the situation in which the selection criteria skills or abilities were used

Task - Provide an overview of the task and responsibilities the applicant was required to perform

Action - Outline the steps or activities undertaken to deliver the task

Result - Provide evidence of outcomes and achievements

While it may sound simple, addressing selection criteria can be quite onerous. Most positions list between 4-8 separate selection criteria to be addressed. Some positions might require fewer and some more, but regardless, it can be a considerable amount of writing. I have known individuals who have spent many days struggling with their responses.

Identifying the appropriate information to meet the STAR Model requirements is only one aspect of the response. In a few short paragraphs the author is not only required to identify their most appropriate skills, experience and achievements, but they must do so in a concise, well written document that convinces someone to hire them – or at minimum interview them.

Here are a few more tips to help with addressing standard selection criteria;

Length - Responses should typically range from 200 to 270 words. Too short and you may miss important information. Too long and you risk boring the reader or including surplus information.

Bullet Points – The use of bullet points is encouraged to separate and emphasise important information. The impact of important content can be lost in long wordy paragraphs.

Understand criteria language – Read the criteria language very carefully, paying close attention to the adverbs used. The use of differing adverbs should illicit a different response. For example a response requiring ‘extensive knowledge of X’ requires a more complex or comprehensive response than criteria requiring ‘sound knowledge of X’.

Use clear and concise language – Avoid long rambling responses. Always important, even more so when one of the selection criteria requirements is strong written communication skills.

Read Application information carefully – The importance of reading application documentation thoroughly cannot be overstated. Critical ‘where, when and how to’ information should all be outlined clearly in this documentation, and properly understood due to the sometimes differing selection criteria requirements.

While it is not essential to use the Star Model, and there are alternatives, the Star Model is the most widely used and best understood across the public sector. This familiarity with the Star Model by recruiters and selection panels continues to make a powerful argument for its ongoing use.

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