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BEST PRACTICES FOR THE RECRUITMENT OF PARLIAMENTARY STAFF

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Comparative perspectives drawing on the example of the Swiss parliamentary administration

Introduction

When discussing the recruitment of parliamentary staff, it is necessary to begin by recalling the very particular context in which this recruitment takes place. A parliamentary administration is not like any other administration. It serves Parliament and its Members in a highly politicized environment, yet must guard against any bias. It must remain impartial even as its environment constantly changes as majorities shift. It must also contribute to the balance of powers by helping Parliament to counterbalance the Government's expertise. These constraints give rise to three qualities that any good parliamentary administration must embody: neutrality, permanence and autonomy.

In Switzerland, these principles translate very concretely into the institutional set-up. The Parliamentary Services depend exclusively on the legislature and are entirely independent of the government. They are headed by the Secretary General, who acts both as chief of staff to the parliamentary bodies and as manager of the parliamentary administration.

The Secretary General enjoys very broad autonomy in the recruitment and management of staff. Above him, an Administration Delegation (ADel) - comprising the Presidents and Vice-Presidents of both Chambers - exercises general oversight of the administration but shows great restraint: it never intervenes in the selection of individual staff members, except for a limited number of senior management posts provided for in legislation.

It is this clear distinction between general political guidelines and specific administrative decisions that enables the Swiss parliamentary administration to select its staff solely on the basis of the needs of the post and the skills required, shielded from any hierarchical or partisan pressure.

In this context, recruitment is therefore not simply a matter of filling a vacancy. It plays a direct part in the parliamentary administration's ability to remain neutral, competent, permanent and independent.

It is within this institutional context that the best recruitment practices take on their full meaning.

1. Transparency in the recruitment process

Transparency in the recruitment process is the first of these practices.

In the Swiss federal administration, both parliamentary and governmental, the public advertisement of vacancies is a legal requirement. Far more than a mere formality, this procedure guarantees fair access to all applicants. Certain exceptions exist, notably for internships or temporary staff exchanges.

This openness in recruitment is a fundamental pillar. To meet Parliament's requirements, the Parliamentary Services seek a diverse range of qualified candidates. They recruit exclusively from the labour market, competing with other employers, both public and private. Each staff member is selected for a specific post, within the framework of a role-based system: the system provides for neither competitive entrance examinations nor automatic career progression.

Positions are open to everyone. The only factors that count are professional and interpersonal skills, as well as experience. Job vacancies, published centrally, clearly set out the duties, responsibilities, required skills and selection criteria. They are advertised on:

- the Swiss Confederation's jobs portal (www.stelle.admin.ch),

- professional networks such as LinkedIn,
- university forums,
- and a dedicated page on the Parliament's website (www.parlament.ch/fr/services/offres-emploi) .

An *employer branding* strategy has also been put in place to raise the profile of the parliamentary administration and promote its career opportunities.

Finally, transparency is not limited to the publication of job vacancies. It also involves justifying the decisions taken. All applications are processed centrally, and the documentation of each stage of the recruitment process ensures full traceability, whilst enabling us to identify areas for improvement for future recruitment.

2. Equal opportunities and non-discrimination

This requirement for transparency is inextricably linked to a second principle: that of equal opportunities and non-discrimination. Transparent recruitment only makes sense if access to posts is genuinely equitable, without distinction based on gender, age, origin, disability, religion or any other protected characteristic. Equal access for both internal and external candidates is also explicitly sought. This openness allows for a comparison of qualifications and also encourages a mix of profiles.

The stakes are particularly high in the parliamentary administration. Such an administration must serve all Members of Parliament equally, regardless of their political affiliation. It would therefore be difficult to reconcile with this requirement for neutrality if recruitment were determined by partisan or personal considerations.

Whilst the Secretary General and the ADeI refrain from intervening in individual recruitment decisions, they reserve the right to set general guidelines concerning the representation of linguistic communities, the integration of people with disabilities, and gender balance. In other words, equal opportunities are not left to chance: they are the subject of an explicit political framework, whilst their practical implementation remains the responsibility of the administration.

3. Merit-based recruitment

Once access to the post has been made equitable, the central question remains: how should candidates be selected?

In the Swiss parliamentary administration, recruitment is based exclusively on merit: the only factors that count are candidates' professional and interpersonal skills, as well as their experience, regardless of their seniority or whether they are internal or external candidates.

This involves assessing applications according to objective criteria, defined before the vacancy is even advertised, and, where relevant, using written tests or practical simulations. For senior positions, in-depth assessments run by external providers may be organized, but only in very few cases.

The composition of the recruitment team also serves as an important safeguard. We ensure that selection decisions are taken by several people, so as to compare assessments and limit the influence of any single individual's judgement. The systematic involvement of a human resources representative also helps to ensure a structured and professional selection process. This comprises several interview stages: it may begin with a brief online exchange, followed by a face-to-face interview and possibly two further ones. This approach enables us to assess

candidates' skills and aptitudes from different angles and to base the recruitment decision on as broad and objective an assessment as possible.

4. A clear definition of job profiles

To recruit because of merit, it is essential to know precisely what one is looking for. This is why defining the job profile is a crucial step.

In the Swiss parliamentary administration, each post is assessed - before it is advertised - based on a detailed job description, and then classified into a specific salary grade determined by the required qualifications, the scope of responsibilities and the level of risk inherent in the role.

This precision has a very practical consequence: it enables candidates to be selected on the basis of factors directly related to the post.

This rigour in the job description - responsibilities, expected technical and behavioural skills, level of experience, language requirements - is not merely an administrative formality: it is essential for ensuring that the assessment of applications is truly objective. It also facilitates comparison between applications and reduces the risk of unannounced subjective criteria coming into play.

Thus, the quality of recruitment depends largely on the quality of the work carried out even before the vacancy is advertised.

5. Preventing conflicts of interest

The prevention of conflicts of interest also takes on a particular significance because of its proximity to the political world.

The Swiss system specifically seeks to maintain a watertight separation between political and administrative responsibilities. This is reflected in a strict division of roles: the political bodies - the ADEL - set the general framework and appoint a limited number of senior managers, but they scrupulously refrain from intervening in the selection of other staff, which is the exclusive responsibility of the Secretary General. This institutional separation is the best bulwark against favouritism and partisan interference.

This separation must also be safeguarded during the recruitment process. Those taking part in an interview must therefore disclose any personal or professional connection they may have with a candidate. The aim is not to assume that such a connection automatically constitutes a problem. Rather, it is to ensure that it is identified and, where necessary, to take steps to preserve the impartiality of the process.

6. The professionalization of recruitment

Ultimately, the effectiveness of this system depends on the professionalism of those carrying out recruitment. In practical terms, this involves training those responsible for recruitment in interview techniques and the detection of unconscious bias, assessing applications using standardized assessment grids to ensure a fair comparison, and archiving application files in accordance with data protection rules. Verifying candidates' references and integrity is also part of this approach - checking qualifications, verifying professional references and, where the legal framework permits, carrying out security checks for the most sensitive posts. These checks are not a sign of mistrust: they are the logical counterpart to the trust subsequently placed in the person selected.

7. Induction and the probationary period

Recruitment does not end with the decision to hire. A smooth induction is key to the success of any new appointment: a structured induction programme should be put in place, clear objectives set for the probationary period, and regular follow-ups organized with the line manager, supported by human resources professionals. This approach to follow-up is, in fact, in line with a well-established practice within the Swiss parliamentary administration, where annual appraisal interviews provide an opportunity to review working conditions, set performance and behavioural objectives, and propose training measures tailored to everyone's career development.

Interns and apprentices have the opportunity, at the end of their training, to apply for a 'junior' post within the Parliamentary Services for a maximum period of two years. This role offers them the chance to broaden and deepen their knowledge by working in other sectors. Following this experience, these staff members also form a pool of young talent capable of contributing to the renewal of skills within the Parliamentary Services.

8. Evaluation and continuous improvement

Finally, no recruitment system can remain static: it must be part of a process of continuous evaluation and improvement. This involves measuring the quality of recruitment - turnaround times, satisfaction, retention, performance - periodically reviewing procedures, and incorporating feedback from candidates, managers and new staff members.

The labour market in Switzerland is dynamic, and competition for certain profiles is particularly fierce. This situation requires the parliamentary administration to be able to attract and recruit highly qualified individuals. This is why our recruitment processes must be agile. To avoid missing out on high-calibre candidates, we review applications as soon as we receive them and promptly contact those who best match the job requirements.

It is this ability to respond and adapt that enables even a well-established system to keep pace with the realities on the ground.

Conclusion

What can we take away from this overview of best practices in the recruitment of parliamentary staff? Firstly, that the quality of a recruitment process always rests on the same foundation: transparency, equal opportunities, and merit as the sole selection criterion.

Secondly, that this foundation can only bear fruit if it is underpinned by clearly defined job profiles and by recruiters who are trained and well-equipped. But the Swiss example teaches a deeper lesson above all: the best safeguard against conflicts of interest and partisan pressure is not merely a matter of individual good conduct; it is an institutional framework that clearly separates political decisions from administrative ones, and entrusts the latter to an autonomous, neutral and permanent administration.

It is this autonomy, based on the principle of subsidiarity - leaving the decision to the person closest to the issue - that enables the parliamentary administration to recruit and manage its staff solely on the basis of competence. And this is perhaps, ultimately, the best protection that a parliamentary democracy can offer its own institutions.
