DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING A COMPUTER-ADMINISTERED PERSONNEL SECURITY SCREENING QUESTIONNAIRE[1]

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Background

Each of the military services prescreens its enlisted applicants for Sensitive Compartmented Information (SCI) access, Top Secret (TS) clearance or critical nuclear assignment. This prescreening is conducted to determine which individuals should be processed further for occupations involving sensitive duties.

The Bureau of Naval Personnel requested that the Defense Personnel Security Research Center (PERSEREC) design improved applicant prescreening procedures for sensitive Navy ratings during the classification of enlisted personnel at the Military Entrance Processing Stations (MEPS). The goal was to reduce the number of enlisted personnel who would be found ineligible for a sensitive assignment during subsequent in-service screening and during the formal security clearance background investigation.

System Description

A computer-administered security screening system called Military Applicant Security Screening (MASS) was constructed. The MASS system was designed as a stand-alone program that can run on IBM 286 computers already being used by Navy classifiers to make school seat reservations for applicants at the MEPS.

The MASS questionnaire inquires about the following areas of security concern: (1) alcohol consumption; (2) allegiance; (3) drug involvement; (4) emotional and mental health; (5) financial responsibility; (6) foreign travel and connections; (7) law violations; (8) personal conduct; and (9) security issues. These areas, and the specific questions within the areas, were developed by reviewing DoD security guidelines, evaluating existing paper and pencil security questionnaires and discussing specific issues to be included with security and legal professionals.

An example of an initial question within the law violation area is:

   1. Have you ever been cited, arrested or charged by civilian or military law enforcement officials for any of the following VEHICLE-RELATED OFFENSES?

      a. Operating an improperly licensed or unregistered vehicle

      b. Operating an unsafe vehicle

      c. Driving without a valid license

      d. Hit and run

      e. Driving under the influence or driving while intoxicated

      f. Open container violation

      g. Reckless driving

      h Moving violation

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[1]All statements expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official opinions or policies of PERSEREC or the Department of Defense.

If the applicant responds "yes" to an item, subsequent screens appear to obtain additional information. For example, a "yes" response on driving under the influence would induce follow-up questions for each incident concerning the reason for citation, where it occurred, whether the offense was a felony, the final outcome of the case, and the punishment if any.

Each applicant for a sensitive rating is individually administered the MASS questionnaire by a Navy classifier. The system includes a decision aid that automatically informs the classifier whether the information provided by the applicant is disqualifying or potentially disqualifying for the rating being considered, or whether it requires that a waiver be obtained to allow the applicant to enter the Navy. This decision aid, appearing as a flag, is triggered whenever an applicant response meets criteria for one or more of these situations. The rules for the decision aid were established by linking all possible responses to MASS questions to criteria contained in the Navy Recruiting Manual concerning acceptance into ratings and into the Navy. For example, a response to the above question that the applicant had been convicted of a hit and run accident and had been in prison for a year would generate a flag that says "mandatory rejection". A response that the applicant had been convicted of driving while intoxicated might trigger a flag that says "possible rejection".

In addition to the flags, the system provides a summary of all potentially derogatory information disclosed during the interview, along with an indication of what further actions need to be taken by the classifier. The classifier is able to access this summary at any time during the interview. The classifier is also told to call Navy security personnel to assist them in deciding whether to continue processing applicants whose responses to questions trigger the "possible rejection" indicator, or where they need assistance in making decisions on other potentially derogatory indicators.

MASS System Test and Evaluation

MASS was tested and evaluated at nine MEPS from April to November 1993. The study involved all new applicants to the sensitive ratings, and all individuals who already had been assigned to one of the ratings, but were in a delayed entry program (DEP) prior to officially entering the Navy. The latter group, if they had not taken MASS when they entered the DEP, had to take MASS when they left the DEP.

Classifiers were sent instructions for installing MASS on a hard drive; they were also sent a tutorial for running the program. They were instructed to print copies of all MASS summaries and forward one copy to PERSEREC by the 5th of the month for all transactions conducted the previous month.

For the period 1 January to early November 993 a total of 310 MASS summaries were received. Each summary contained the potentially derogatory information that had been indicated by the applicant. Analysis of the data indicated that the most frequently reported item was moving violations not related to alcohol or drugs. Others that appeared frequently included discipline by school administrators, intoxication, marijuana use, indices of financial irresponsibility and questions about foreign travel and connections.

Telephone feedback from Navy classifiers was generally positive. They reported a preference for the MASS interview format over a paper-and-pencil security prescreening questionnaire they had previously been using in screening for two SCI ratings. It was found that the MASS questionnaire required 25-40 minutes to complete, depending on the amount of potentially derogatory information collected. The structured format and in-depth questions were particularly helpful in obtaining the information needed to make a processing decision in a timely manner.

The positive results of the test and evaluation generated a recommendation that Navy Recruiting Command implement the MASS system throughout all the MEPS. The recommendation was approved which led to a program to: (a) revise MASS based on lessons learned during the test and evaluation and (b) assist the Navy in implementing the system.

MASS Program Revision

The program revision consisted of revising and updating the three major components of the system: (1) the questionnaire itself; (2) the triggering mechanism underlying the flags and (3) the manner in which the results were presented to classifiers.

Revisions were made both to the questionnaire format and to the wording of some of the questions. The basic rule used in these revisions was to make the questionnaire easier to administer and to reduce the time required for completion. For example, it was found that there were too many questions concerning the employment and travel

behavior of close relatives and associates. Often applicants did not have the information needed to respond to the items. Some of the items were no longer required by the security system given changing world conditions.

The module to relate applicant responses to the Navy Recruiting Manual was revised in accordance with recommendations from the field and discussion with security personnel. In essence, the module was "fine-tuned" to modify certain levels of sensitivity to triggering flags. For example, differentiation was made between suspension and expulsion from school as a potential flag; the latter being far more serious.

The format of the summary module was revised to provide classifiers with clearer direction concerning their responsibilities to call Navy security personnel where derogatory information was disclosed. Coordination was established between the various Navy security offices and Navy Recruiting Command to insure availability of personnel to answer the classifier inquiries in a timely manner.

MASS Implementation

The process to implement MASS at all the MEPS was initiated at the end of December 1995. Computer disks containing the MASS program, instructions and a brief tutorial were mailed to the MEPS. It was directed that MASS was to be administered to all applicants for sensitive Navy ratings. Further, copies of the MASS summary form were to be retained in the applicant's service record and residual file and one copy mailed to PERSEREC.

Several issues arose during the period of time while MASS was being installed on the MEPS computers. Some MEPS offices and classifiers engaged in stalling tactics. Several reasons for this behavior became apparent through telephone interviews. Some classifiers were simply not anxious to increase their workload; others were afraid that MASS would reduce their ability to fill school seats with qualified applicants; and still others were influenced by recruiters who were afraid that they would lose applicants. In fact, in most instances applicants were not "lost" to the Navy, rather they were placed in ratings that did not have to meet the requirements of the PRP program or require a TS/SCI clearance.

Evaluation of MASS Summary Forms

A database for entering data from the MASS summary forms was created in Microsoft ACCESS. Only the derogatory information contained on each form was entered into the database. The relational nature of the database format was particularly useful because it allowed quick data entry into the appropriate fields.

A total of 1870 complete MASS summary forms were received between January and October 1996. This number represents many but not all the applicants processed with MASS during this time period. Several MEPS were slow to implement MASS or continued using an older version for some period of time. Not all forms were forwarded by the MEPS, in particular those that indicated mandatory rejection. In some instances the forms received were illegible. Of the 1870 forms, 1082 were for SCI ratings, 323 for TS ratings and 464 for PRP ratings.

Approximately 83% of the forms contained some potentially derogatory information. Almost 70% of these contained multiple issues. Table 1 presents the number of cases with potentially derogatory information disclosed and possible rejection flags by area. Column 2 of Table 1 indicates that the area with the greatest potential derogatory information is law violations followed by personal conduct, financial responsibility, drugs, foreign connections and alcohol.

Table 1

Potentially Derogatory Information and Possible Rejection Flags by Area

Area	Case with Potential Derogatory (N)	Cases with Possible Rejection Flags (N)
Alcohol	325	128
Allegiance	1	1
Drugs	360	134
Emotional/Mental	58	20
Financial Responsibility	497	263
Foreign Connections	339	113
Law Violations	1061	306
Personal Conduct	890	248
Security Violation	1	1

Total Cases = 1870
Total Possible Rejection Flags = 420

The most common derogatory issue in the law violations area is moving violations not involving alcohol or drugs indicated in 76% of cases with some law violation issue. In the area of personal conduct, the most common issue was discipline at school (70%) followed by quitting a job without giving two weeks notice (34%). Bounced checks are the most frequent issue regarding financial responsibility (51 %) followed by having debts totaling more than half of annual salary and having bills sent to collection agencies (30% each). Ninety-eight percent of cases with a drug issue had used marijuana, although only 13% of those admitted to use during the last six months. For cases with an alcohol issue, intoxication is the most frequent problem (85%), although most people (78%) claim to have been intoxicated five or fewer times.

Some of the issues disclosed were minor; for example traffic violations or drunkenness. However many were more serious and resulted in MASS flags. Overall, 420 (22.5%) of the forms contained possible rejection flags; of these, 90% contained multiple issues and in some cases multiple flags. Column 3 of Table 1 indicates that the most frequent flags were in the areas of law violations, followed by financial responsibility and personal conduct.

The flags resulted in a total of 47 rejections, or approximately 2.5% of the applicants. As indicated earlier, the MEPS did not forward cases with mandatory rejection flags so the actual percentage of rejected applicants is higher but unknown. Of greatest importance is that the MASS process caused MEPS classifiers to prescreen applicants more carefully knowing that they would have to be processed through MASS. This resulted in higher quality personnel being considered for sensitive ratings than had previously been the case.

MASS also served to remind classifiers to obtain waivers on applicants with derogatory information. Approximately 24% of the 1870 forms had waiver flags. The most prevalent of these involved incidents of marijuana use, minor misdemeanors, financial irresponsibility etc.

Conclusion

During the first year of operation the MASS system has been successful in identifying potentially derogatory behavior among applicants. It has also helped establish procedures for classifiers and security personnel to interact to reach decisions on whether to continue to process applicants.

The MASS procedures have been incorporated within the Navy Recruiting Manual and are an official part of the applicant screening process. In addition, these procedures are now being taught to students at the classifier school prior to assuming their duties at the MEPS.

The MASS system has several advantages over a paper-and-pencil mode of administering a security screening questionnaire:

1. Standardizes the inquiry process. Most of the classifiers are not experienced interviewers. Given the turnover of military personnel every two to three years, many of the classifiers working at any particular time are relatively new in their jobs.

2. Assists Navy classifiers in decision making concerning which applicants to place into sensitive ratings. MASS provides this assistance in two ways: (a) using flags to indicate the nature of the action required by classifiers and (b) establishing procedures for interactions between classifiers and security personnel using the results of the MASS interview.

3. Improves the use of information by the various offices conducting security screening and investigations. The MASS summary record is available to security personnel conducting follow-up in-service interviews and the DIS background investigation. In the future when the Navy upgrades their computer capability at the MEPS, MASS summary data could be electronically transmitted to security offices.

Near-term changes to MASS are planned based on feedback received from the field during the first year of operation and changes that have occurred within the Navy system. The Army also has expressed interest in using the MASS system to assist their MEPS personnel in screening applicants to sensitive MOSs. In the future, the MASS system will probably evolve into more of an expert system to provide even greater assistance to classifiers and security personnel.

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