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USA Staffing
Assessment Questionnaire Passing
Score Frequently Asked Questions

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OPM HR SOLUTIONS
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Introduction

The frequently asked questions below are intended to assist agencies and HR specialists in gaining a better understanding of the assessment questionnaire (AQ) passing score functionality in the USA Staffing system. If you have additional questions that are not addressed in this document, please contact your USA Staffing Account Manager.

General/Strategy Questions

1. What is an AQ passing score?

An assessment questionnaire (AQ) passing score is a minimum score an applicant must obtain on an AQ (also referred to as an occupational questionnaire) to be eligible to proceed in the hiring process. An AQ passing score is based on the minimum required level of demonstrated training and experience needed to be proficient in competencies required for success in the target position. Setting a passing score based on the minimum required level of demonstrated training and experience, also referred to here in general terms as minimum level of proficiency, is not the same as determining that only a certain number of applicants can proceed due to administrative reasons such as cost, time, or rater burden (sometimes referred to as a business necessity strategy).

2. How does an AQ passing score differ from a category rating or competitive merit promotion referral cutpoint?

An AQ passing score is based on the minimum requirements for the position whereby only applicants considered 'minimally proficient' in the critical competencies being assessed proceed in the hiring process.

On the other hand, category rating or competitive merit promotion referral criteria (e.g., 90 and above) are used to identify those applicants who are best qualified. That is, an applicant may be minimally proficient regardless of whether they place within the highest quality category or meet competitive merit promotion referral criteria.

An AQ passing score is applied before any cutpoints for category rating or for competitive merit promotion are applied. In addition, the AQ passing score is based on the raw score, not the transmuted (70-100) score. Applicants who fail to meet the AQ passing score do not receive a transmuted score; they are rated ineligible for further consideration. Applicants who score at or above the AQ passing score receive a transmuted rating between 70 and 100.

Lastly, establishing a passing score based on minimum proficiency is a very different process than establishing category rating or competitive merit promotion referral criteria. Category or competitive merit promotion cutpoints are typically established by agency policy (e.g., category rating or merit promotion policy), while passing scores are specific to the assessment used to rate applicants for a particular position.

3. Why use an AQ passing score?

Applying a passing score on the AQ can help to ensure that applicants who are referred to hiring managers have the minimum required level of proficiency in competencies required for success in the target position. Using an AQ passing score also can help to reduce the number of applicants and therefore the resources (e.g., time, funds) needed for later assessments. All applicants who do not demonstrate the minimum level of proficiency (minimum level of demonstrated training and experience) in the required competencies for a specific job series and grade are screened out from further consideration and do not proceed to subsequent stages of the hiring process.

4. Under what conditions is it most helpful or appropriate to establish an AQ passing score?

Agencies will want to consider whether an AQ passing score may be useful for a particular position or series/grade based on a strategic discussion between stakeholders such as hiring organizations/managers, HR representatives, and assessment professionals. Use of an AQ passing score is most helpful in situations where you are: (a) filling positions that require a minimum level of proficiency on specialized technical competencies; (b) looking to pare down a large anticipated applicant pool based on minimum level of proficiency on key competencies; (c) expecting a wide variety of applicants with regard to experience level; (d) filling positions that have a history of attracting candidates who do not meet job requirements; and/or (e) announcing the same position repeatedly due to the volume of those vacancies/positions within the agency.

5. Is my AQ appropriate for use with a passing score?

You can potentially use an existing AQ or develop a new one prior to working through the process of determining what the passing score should be. In any case, it is very important to have a valid assessment that is developed based on job analysis in coordination with subject matter experts and that measures job-related competencies required at entry into the position. You will want to consider the type of rating scales (e.g., default vs. custom, multiple choice vs. select-all-that-apply) and scoring protocol you are using. The more complex the scoring (e.g., with regard to weighting and response option values), the less straightforward the process for establishing a passing score. Also consider how many items are in your questionnaire (a general rule of thumb is a minimum of 3-8 items per competency if using competency-level scoring or 10-40 total items if using item-level or response-level scoring).

6. How do I determine an AQ passing score?

An AQ passing score can be established through a rigorous process involving job experts (subject matter experts) and assessment experts (e.g., I/O psychologists). The process involves identification of the minimum level of proficiency for required competencies for a specific position or job series and grade, and the minimum score necessary on the AQ items to demonstrate the minimum required proficiency. General steps include:

1. Determining if a passing score may be useful for a particular series/grade based on a strategic discussion,
2. Establishing rigorous methodology in consultation with I/O psychologists/assessment experts and legal counsel,
3. Identifying data available that could inform the passing score setting process,
4. Identifying subject matter experts who have first-hand knowledge of what is required to be successful in the position to participate in the passing score setting process,
5. Carrying out the passing score setting process with a trained facilitator,
6. Documenting the process, and
7. Evaluating the results associated with using a given passing score on an ongoing basis.

7. Can a given AQ passing score be used across positions?

A given AQ passing score is tied to a specific AQ. A passing score is based on the minimum proficiency required to be minimally competent in a given position or occupational series and grade. To the extent that the AQs and minimum required proficiency are similar across other positions or occupational series and grades, the passing scores may be similar. That said, agencies will want to think carefully about the implications of setting an AQ passing score on one position or series/grade in relation to other grades or similar positions in the organization.

8. If my agency uses an AQ with a passing score for a position that is posted frequently, should we use the same passing score on all announcements?

If the position is the same series and grade and uses the same AQ, it is recommended that you use a consistent passing score across all announcements.

9. If my agency uses an AQ with a passing score for a position that is repeatedly announced or includes the AQ in an Assessment Package Template, how often should we update the passing score once established?

If you modify the AQ at all (i.e., add, delete, or modify rating item content), the passing score should be re-evaluated. Also, if the position changes over time, it is necessary to re-evaluate the passing score as minimum proficiency requirements may change. Even if the position has not changed, it is recommended to re-evaluate the passing score on a regular schedule (e.g., every 3 - 5 years).

10. What is the Agency's level of responsibility?

Agencies opting to use the AQ passing score feature assume the responsibility for that assessment and the specific passing score that is used. Setting a valid and legally defensible passing score should be done in consultation with assessment experts (e.g., I/O psychologists). Agencies may wish to consult their policy experts and legal counsel to determine if using a passing score would be appropriate, and if so, for which types of recruitments. We also recommend agencies establish guidelines and procedures for establishing and documenting passing scores to ensure consistency and legal defensibility.

11. What type of documentation is required to support use of an AQ passing score?

Agencies need documentation that is consistent with professional and legal guidelines for setting passing scores (also referred to as cut scores). Further information about documentation requirements can be found in:

- [Uniform Employee Selection Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures \(uniformguidelines.com\)](https://www.uniformguidelines.com)
- [The Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing \(apa.org\)](https://www.apa.org)
- [Principles for the Validation and Use of Personnel Selection Procedures | Fifth Edition \(apa.org\)](https://www.apa.org)

12. Are there OPM I/O psychologists available to assist with the development and implementation of AQ passing scores?

If you are interested in I/O psychologist support from OPM HR Solutions (on a reimbursable basis), please contact your USA Staffing Account Manager.

Process/System Questions

13. How is an AQ passing score set up in USA Staffing?

The Passing Score option is available only for AQs using the Weight-Based rating method. The ability to set/apply a passing score is permissioned and defaulted to 'disabled' for all USA Staffing users except Office Administrators. HR users with appropriate permissions can set up an AQ passing score by:

1. Turning on the 'Passing Score' setting on the Assessment Information page, and then
2. Setting the Passing Score Criteria based on the overall raw score that applicants receive on the competencies being assessed. The passing score can be set at different values for different rating combinations (e.g., GS-12 vs. GS-13).

Users can upload documentation supporting the development of the AQ passing score in the 'Documents' section of USA Staffing. HR users are responsible for testing their AQ using the Test Plan scenarios within USA Staffing to confirm the actual outcomes associated with possible applicant response patterns will match expected outcomes.

14. Can I add/remove a Passing Score to an AQ after the announcement is open?

The passing score functionality cannot be turned on for an AQ once the announcement is released and opened. In addition, the passing score cannot be modified once the announcement is released. However, if an error is identified with the passing score criteria, an HR user with appropriate permissions can 'un-complete' the Assessment Package, and then turn off the 'Passing Score' setting for that AQ. Following these steps results in the minimum raw score reverting to 0, in effect removing the passing score requirement. The AQ then needs to be re-tested. Once the revised Assessment Package is completed, the system re-rates all applicants using the new scoring approach. This type of action will be tracked automatically in the AQ History. The HR user is responsible for documenting the rationale for removing the passing score through the Assessment Package notes and/or attached documents.

15. What if we discover an error with a particular question (poorly written, applicants had a hard time understanding it, mis-keyed, etc.) for an AQ with a passing score, when and how can we fix it?

If the error is discovered before the announcement is posted to USAJOBS, the item can be rewritten or removed. If it is removed, the passing score criteria should be re-evaluated and adjusted as needed.

If the error is discovered after the announcement has been released and opened on USAJOBS, the passing score criteria cannot be adjusted at that point. Therefore, the best course of action would be to update the Rating Criteria for the item to give all response options the same maximum score for the item (e.g., if answer E has the highest response value with 5 points, then update the rating criteria to assign the same 5 point value to each of the A through D response options as well). This would ensure that regardless of which response they selected, applicants will receive the maximum number of points for that item, and that item's score will not affect their ability to meet the passing score requirement.

16. At what level (i.e., vacancy, occupational series, agency) are AQ passing scores applied?

AQ passing scores are applied at the vacancy level in the USA Staffing system. That said, agencies can develop an Assessment Package Template that includes the given AQ and relevant passing score for use across similar vacancies (i.e., multiple or repeat announcements of the same position).

17. Is there an additional cost associated with use of the AQ passing score functionality?

No. There is no additional cost for using the AQ passing score functionality. All enhancements to the USA Staffing system are included in your annual USA Staffing license cost.

18. Will use of the AQ passing score functionality extend the time required for the assessment and hiring process?

Once set up in the system, application of the passing score is immediate. No additional time is needed. Rather, use of this functionality may reduce the size of the applicant pool and thus the time needed for the qualifications review. Deciding on the most appropriate assessment strategy for a given position or set of positions involves a host of considerations, including time required, the applicant pool, and the assessments used.

19. Do I need to take any additional steps to set up a job opportunity announcement (JOA) when there is an AQ passing score?

HR users will need to set up the Passing Score Criteria in the Assessment Questionnaire and upload appropriate documentation. HR users also will need to ensure appropriate verbiage about passing scores is in the JOA. Sample verbiage is below.

You will be evaluated based on how well you meet the qualifications listed in this vacancy announcement. Your qualifications will be evaluated based on your application materials (e.g., resume, supporting documents) and the responses you provide on the application questionnaire [add additional assessments as appropriate]. You will be assessed on the following competencies (knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics): [add competencies]

The application questionnaire includes a passing score based on the minimum level of required proficiency across these critical competencies. You must meet or exceed the passing score to be considered. You will not be considered for the position if you score below the passing score.

20. How/when will applicants be notified whether they met the AQ passing score?

Applicants will not know how they scored and whether they met the AQ passing score until the HR user sends them a touchpoint notification with their Notice of Results (NOR). For most case examining recruitments, the HR user will send this notification after the announcement closes, or will send a combined NOR/Notice of Referral after the qualification reviews are complete and the certificates are issued. However, for standing registers or open-continuous announcements, it may be standard practice to send NOR notifications at regular intervals throughout the announcement open period. If you are planning to send NORs for an AQ that uses a passing score while the announcement is still open, we recommend checking the Vacancy setting for “Prevent update of assessment responses after application submission” to ensure applicants cannot get a second chance to pass the assessment.

21. In what order is the AQ passing score applied relative to other steps in the assessment process?

The AQ passing score is applied after the self-evaluation of minimum qualifications but prior to an HR professional conducting a minimum qualifications review or applying any cut points for category rating or for competitive merit promotion. If USA Hire is being used, applicants who do not obtain the passing score on the AQ are not invited to complete the USA Hire assessments. Similarly, if a manual assessment is being used, applicants who do not meet the AQ passing score would be ineligible and therefore not move forward to the manual assessment.

22. Do I need to conduct a qualification review on applicants who were rated ineligible because they did not attain the AQ passing score?

No. Applicants rated ineligible because they did not attain the passing score on the AQ do not need any further review.

23. What information is available to assist during conversations with hiring managers regarding JOAs using AQ passing scores?

These FAQs serve as the primary resource for AQ passing scores. We encourage HR users to use the responses provided in these FAQs to address hiring manager questions.

24. Is the AQ passing score functionality visible to all users? Is there an option to not display this functionality?

The ability to use the AQ passing score functionality is permissioned, so Office Administrators are able to determine which users can enable the 'Passing Score' setting or set/modify the Passing Score Criteria. However, the setting itself as well as the Passing Score Criteria page will be visible to any users who have access to view or create/edit assessments.

25. What Notice of Results (NOR) code will applicants receive if they do not attain the AQ passing score?

IQAQ - You are ineligible to proceed in the hiring process because you did not attain the overall passing score on the application questionnaire for the position.

26. How do AQ passing scores affect the way an agency handles veterans' preference?

Current veterans' preference policies remain in effect. Veterans who score at or above the AQ passing score are considered eligible for further consideration for the position, and those who do not are rated ineligible. Veterans' preference is applied to eligible applicants once all required assessments are completed and an applicant's final score is calculated.

27. Do all applicants, including CP/CPS veterans, need to meet the AQ passing score to be eligible?

Yes. When using an AQ passing score, that passing score becomes part of the minimum requirements for the position. Applicants who do not meet the passing score have not demonstrated the minimum level of proficiency in the required competencies for the position/specific job series and grade, and are therefore screened out from further consideration.

28. Can an AQ that uses a passing score be combined with other assessments, including USA Hire assessments with a cut score?

Yes. AQs with a passing score requirement can be used independently or in combination with USA Hire (including USA Hire assessments with a cut score) and/or manual assessments. Scores are combined using the same or similar procedures as combining assessments without passing scores. The only restriction is for applicants who do not obtain the passing score on the AQ. These applicants are ineligible, so they would not be invited to complete a subsequent USA Hire battery and/or manual assessment. If you have questions about combining assessments, please contact your USA Staffing Account Manager.

29. Can I use the AQ passing score functionality with an ACWA assessment questionnaire?

The AQ passing score functionality cannot be applied on the ACWA assessments themselves because the scoring protocol for these assessments cannot be modified by HR users. However, agencies developing their own AQ using the Weight-Based rating method for a position covered by an ACWA questionnaire can set a passing score for it.

30. Can I use the AQ passing score functionality within USA Staffing with a wage grade position?

No. The AQ passing score functionality can be used only for AQs using the Weight-Based rating method. The Job Element rating method used to score AQs for wage grade positions already has passing score criteria set up 'behind the scenes' (i.e., as specified in the wage grade qualifications, all applicants must meet an average of two points across all job elements in order to be minimally qualified).

Applicant Questions

31. How do I respond if an applicant asks what the AQ passing score is for the vacancy or asks for more detailed information about his/her score?

Agencies should respond to applicant inquiries regarding the AQ passing score in accordance with agency policies and procedures, and in consultation with their General Counsel. Generally, all scoring information, including passing scores, is considered secure test information and is not shared with applicants. Sharing scoring information with applicants, including raw scores that do not meet the passing criteria, could compromise the objectivity and/or integrity of the assessment process.

32. What should I tell an applicant who asks about which items or competencies he or she failed?

The AQ passing score is based on the overall AQ score rather than how the applicant responded to any particular item/competency or subset of items/competencies.

33. What does it mean when the announcement says applicants must meet or exceed a passing score on the AQ?

The passing score is the overall minimum score that has been established for a given AQ based on the minimum requirements for the position. To be eligible to proceed in the hiring process, an applicant must score at or above the passing score on the AQ and meet any other minimum qualification requirements.

34. What happens if the applicant has completed the same AQ for a different vacancy?

The AQ passing score is vacancy-specific. Applicants' AQ scores are not reused. If another position uses the same Assessment Package Template, including the same AQ and passing score, the applicant will complete the AQ for that other position and their score will be calculated based on their responses.

35. What happens if there are multiple assessments, not just the AQ?

The applicant must meet the minimum qualifications and attain the passing score on the AQ to proceed to the subsequent assessments (e.g., USA Hire, manual assessment).