

Merit Hiring Plan Learning Series Direct Hire Authority & Assessments

June 16, 2026

**U.S. Office of Personnel Management
Workforce Policy & Innovation
HX@opm.gov**

Merit Hiring Plan (MHP) and Direct Hire Authority (DHA)

Reinforces requirement to use job-related, validated assessment tools to verify that applicants meet the qualifications

Eliminates use of self-reported assessment/occupational questionnaire to satisfy DHA assessment requirements

Instructs agencies to assess specialized experience using one or multiple technical assessments

Requires pre-certificate assessment of applicants to the extent that such assessment(s) identify applicants who have the level of proficiency needed for successful job performance

Assessment tools that fit DHA

Use at least one skills-based assessment tool that does not rely on applicant's self-reported assessment.

USA Hire

Standard & specialized assessments

Technical skills test

IT, cyber, accounting, HR

Work sample

Case study, coding, writing

Structured interview

Behavioral or situational

Structured Resume Review

Criteria-based

Simulation

Performance-based

Situational judgement test

Reminder: Assessment results must **not** be used to rank candidates

Tip: Combine tools when useful—for example, a technical test plus a structured interview—to improve the evidence base.

Key Points for creating a DHA certificate

- Agencies determine the required **proficiency level** for the required competencies **that may supplement the minimum qualifications**
- Proficiency level must be job-related and consistent with the position's duties and qualification requirements
- Determination of the required proficiency level is done in advance

Establishing Proficiency Levels

When using DHA, agencies determine the required **proficiency level** for the required competencies **that may supplement the minimum qualifications**



Identify the **critical competencies or tasks** tied to the specialized experience



Determine how proficiency will be **measured**



Define the **minimum passing score** required for referral to hiring manager



Document the **methodology** used to determine proficiency levels

All the applicants who meet the cutoff score are referred to the hiring manager for consideration.

Based on OPM requirements that DHA assessments be supported by job analysis, measure job-relevant skills/competencies, provide valid evidence, and reinforce merit principles.

Example 1: GS-801-12 Engineer

Assessment Used

Min Quals: Self Assessment and Resume Review both pass/fail

Technical Assessment: USA Hire Standard Assessment

Proficiency Level For Referral

Pass Min Quals Assessment

Score at least 90 on Technical Assessment

Well-qualified for ICTAP/CTAP is 90

Certificate Creation

ICTAP/CTAP eligibles who score **90** or higher are referred

Applicants who score **90** or higher are placed on the certificate in random order

Example 2: GS-340-13 Program Manager

Assessment Used

Min Quals:
Resume Review

Technical
Assessment:
Structured
Interview
conducted by HM
or SME

Proficiency Level For Referral

Pass Min Quals
Assessment

Score at least 90 on
Technical
Assessment

Well-qualified for
ICTAP/CTAP is 90

Certificate Creation

ICTAP/CTAP
eligibles who score
90 or higher are
referred and
selected

Applicants who
score **90** or higher
are placed on the
certificate in
random order

DHA and Assessments: Myths We Need to Dispel

Myth	Reality	Why It Matters
<p>Only HR can determine minimum qualifications; hiring managers/SMEs cannot be involved.</p>	<p>HR is accountable for qualification determinations, but hiring managers and SMEs should help shape job analysis, competencies, and assessment strategy.</p>	<p>Excluding hiring officials and SMEs too early can weaken the link between the work, the competencies, and the assessment strategy</p>
<p>ICTAP/CTAP applicants only need to meet minimum qualifications.</p>	<p>ICTAP/CTAP priority depends on being well-qualified, not just minimally qualified.</p>	<p>Treating minimum qualifications as enough can produce improper priority consideration and referral errors</p>
<p>Applicants only need minimum qualifications to be certified on a DHA cert.</p>	<p>DHA removes rating and ranking, not qualification requirements; applicants still must meet the position requirements.</p>	<p>DHA streamlines how candidates are considered and referred, but applicants must still meet the applicable qualification requirements.</p>

DHA and Assessments: Myths We Need to Dispel (Continued)

Myth	Reality	Why It Matters
Using technical or skills-based assessments under DHA defeats DHA's purpose by increasing time to hire.	DHA is still a streamlined hiring authority, but agencies must use appropriate assessments to verify that applicants are qualified using valid, job-related assessments.	The key issue is not whether agencies assess candidates under DHA, but whether they use appropriate assessments that support both hiring quality and speed, rather than recreating the competitive examining process.

Bottom line: DHA changes referral mechanics; it does not erase qualifications, and CTAP/ICTAP priority is not based on minimum qualifications alone.

Resources

- [E. O. 14170, Reforming the Federal Hiring Process and Restoring Merit to Government Service](#) (January 30, 2025)
- [Merit Hiring Plan](#) (May 29, 2025)
- [Job Titling Guidance in Alignment with Executive Order 14170 and the Merit Hiring Plan](#) (September 9, 2025)
- [Guidance on Use of Hiring Assessments when Utilizing Direct Hire Authority](#) (February 23, 2026)
- [Supplemental Guidance on the Merit Hiring Plan](#) (February 23, 2026)