



UNDERSTANDING THE WORK CAPACITY TEST

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CHRONOLOGY

- Jan ~ Preparation for the 2012 season hiring of temporary employees.
- May 7 WCT Administered.
- May 8 Notification to the Regional Fire Operations Risk Management Officer.
- May 14 Employee released from light duty.
- May 16 Discussion regarding the job duty with District Ranger and Acting Division Chief.
- June 12 FLA Team in-briefing with the Forest Administrators.

EVENT SUMMARY

In January of 2012 a local District was preparing for the upcoming summer seasonal hiring of temporary employees. Outreach was conducted and a seventy-one year old Veteran responded to a GS-0462-03 Forestry Aid vacancy announcement on USA Jobs and submitted their application. Subject Matter Experts noticed the date of the applicant’s graduation from high school. As there are age limitations for permanent Firefighters, Administrative Support contacted the Supervisors Office to inquire about age limitations for temporary firefighters. Learning that there are no age limitations, the Veteran received hiring preference and was selected. The introductory statement to the position description stated this is a standard wildland fire management position intended for use in the USDA, Forest Service. The position is part of a wildland fire crew. The primary purpose of this position is to perform wildland firefighting work. These crews perform work directly related to wildland fire suppression and control activities including suppression, preparedness, prevention, monitoring, and hazardous fuels reduction. The crew members, known as Fire Fighters, may also perform duties in other fuels related or ecosystem restoration projects.

The Forest Health Screening Questionnaire (HSQ) Coordinator properly completed and processed the HSQ’s for the applicants selected for the 2012 Season Temporary Hires. Per the Work Capacity Test (WCT) for Wildland Fire Qualifications-Implementation Guide the HSQ Coordinator does not have a Human Resource role; their job is to process the HSQ forms, make determinations based on established criteria, and ensure that employees move through the process.

The HSQ Coordinator received the HSQ forms from selected employees, reviewed the completed HSQ forms and based on the responses; made the determination to proceed

with the administrative coordination of seasonal hiring. Allowing four weeks, the HSQ coordinator provided notification to selected employees that they may precede with physical fitness training. The employee completed the required Consent Form and self-Health Screening Questionnaire, stating they did not have any medical concerns and they would not be placing themselves or their health at risk.

The employee was informed of the requirements of the WCT, the official method of assessing wildland firefighter fitness levels for Forest Service personnel. The WCT requires an individual to demonstrate their ability to perform the fitness requirements of a position. In which case, the required position was a Fire Fighter Type II which required the “Arduous” WCT. The pack test is the job-related test of the capacity for arduous work. The WCT consists of a 3-mile hike with a 45-pound pack over level terrain. A passing score of 45 minutes or less is a condition of employment for the Forestry Technician seasonal temporary employment.

During the month prior to the WCT the Engine Captain (Supervisor) and district personnel called the employee to follow up on paperwork requirements. Efforts included several attempts to make the new employee feel welcome to the organization. Wanting to start the new employee with a positive experience, the employee was invited to the fire station, each time the employee declined the invitation. The District personnel continued checking in with the employee frequently, asking how things were going, if they needed anything, did they have any questions, etc. The employee asked the common questions regarding boots, uniforms, etc.

Arduous duties set forth by the National Wildland Coordinating Group was shared with the employee during these telephone calls; “Duties involve field work requiring physical performance with average endurance and superior conditioning. These duties may include an occasional demand for extraordinarily strenuous activities in emergencies under adverse environmental conditions and over extended periods of time. Requirements include running, walking, climbing, jumping, twisting, bending, and lifting more than 50 pounds.” –NWCG 310-1

On May 7, 2012, at the District Office, the WCT Administrator prepared the WCT for the seasonal temporary employees. The number of individuals needed to assist with administering the WCT had been determined. The test administrator prepared a Job Hazard Analysis (JHA) and a local emergency medical and evacuation plan. A qualified Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) with an Automated External Defibrillator (AED) was on site to observe employees during and after the test, and provide medical assistance if needed. An individual was assigned to each position identified in the WCT Administrator Guide; Course Monitor, Lap Counter, and Timer to assist with administering the test.

Using Appendix A of the WCT Administrators Guide the Test Administrator provided a thorough briefing with the WCT employees. Employees, read and signed the Job

Hazardous Analysis (JHA), and were briefed by the WCT Administer on footwear, safety, warm-up, pace, and the importance of hydration.

At approximately 10:00 a.m. on May 7, 2012 the WCT test commenced. The temperature was 77 degrees, Relative Humidity was 77%, Heat Stress was moderate and the test was completed at an elevation of 1,000 feet on level terrain. Based on a visual assessment, the personnel on site as a general consensus questioned the employee's ability to complete the test successfully. However, as all the paperwork indicated the eligibility of all the employees to participate, they all began the test. Performing the duties as course monitor the Engine Captain joined the employee mid-way of the WCT. The employee was walking slower than recommended pace of 4 mph. The Engine Captain noticed the employee lean forward at which point he fell and sustained injuries. The Engine Captain immediately placed the employee into a position of comfort, provided first-aid, and made the appropriate notifications per the predetermined medical plan. The identified EMT responded to the fallen employee with a trauma bag and AED. The EMT observed three separate lacerations to the employee's forehead, abrasion to the knees, and small avulsion to the thumb. In the best interest for all parties involved, the EMT requested a medical unit to the scene. The employee was transported to a local hospital where they were met by the Engine Captain. The employee received a medical exam, sixteen stitches, CT scan (Computerized Tomography, CAT Scan) and released to drive home. The District contacted the Albuquerque Service Center Office of Workers Compensation, the Forest and the Regional Office for guidance on next steps.

The employee was placed on light duty until the stitches were removed. Seven days later the Medical Provider released the employee to full duty and the employee asked to re-take the WCT. The WCT Administers Guide does provide an opportunity to retake the test if they don't complete the first test. The employee met with the District Ranger, Acting Division Chief and Engine Captain to assess the first test due to the injuries, preparations for the second test and revisited the arduous duties of the position. After the discussion the employee declined to take the second test and resigned the position.

LESSONS LEARNED BY THOSE INVOLVED

- The process worked as designed, however it failed to safeguard the employee.
- A medical evaluation for employees in advance of the pack test would be beneficial.
- We are empowered to stop the WCT.
- Take the time to counsel prospective employees about the requirements and expectations of the position. This will help them to make an informed decision as to if they are ready for the job.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Establish National Medical Standards for Medical Evaluations in advance of the administration of the WCT. Explore National policy implications.
- Validate National Vacancy Announcement and Position Description before advertising new Forestry Aid positions in eRecruit. The documents/video should clearly represent the arduous scope of the position.
- Revise and update the Region 5 WCT website to provide clear accessible direction including “Frequently Asked Questions” to include resolutions achieved via this FLA.
- Supervisors need provide accurate information about the requirements and expectations of the position to prospective employees in order for them to make an informed decision as to if they are ready for the job.