DNA testing

A new project is examining a crucial question for all of us: What makes a good TSO? David Woollard, Steve Greenfield **and** Paul Brewerton **explain their progress so far**

| David Woollard. | Steve Greenfield. | Paul Brewerton. |

SETTING THE SCENE

The initial idea for this project was hatched between Steve Greenfield, county trading standards officer for Suffolk and David Woollard, of David Woollard HR Consulting, while they were discussing how to increase both the numbers and quality of people joining the trading standards profession.

These discussions were prompted by questions such as:
● Do we know what the key personal qualities and attributes of an excellent trading standards officer are?
● What characteristics might pre-dispose someone not to be suited to the role of a trading standards officer?

While it became apparent very quickly that most people in the trading standards profession have views about the answers to these questions, no-one had ever gone about researching them in any depth or

people wishing to become a 'regulatory services field officer' (RSFO).

In this way, it was anticipated that the project and its outcomes would be relevant to professions including trading standards, environmental health, health and safety, food standards, building control and licensing.

We decided to use the rigour of a psychometric approach to the development of the assessments. This means applying scientific methods to ensure the assessments are fair, reliable, robust and fit-for-purpose. In this way, they will be able to differentiate fairly and objectively among applicants. We therefore chose a partner with appropriate expertise, Blue Edge Consulting, because the company – with Paul Brewerton as the main contact on this project – possessed an impressive track record in this area and is considered a leader in this field.

The project came to life when the required funding was obtained from the East of England Trading Standards Authority (EETSA) in May 2006.

METHODOLOGY

In order to find out what indeed 'might make a good one', we decided to initially

adopt a qualitative approach. This meant identifying a range of people from across the regulatory services professions and then carrying out a series of semi-structured interviews with them, asking questions such as the following:
● What would you say are the key differences between a really good RSFO and one that is 'average'? We are particularly interested in behaviour, skills, knowledge, experience, approach to work;
● What are the most important knowledge requirements, skills and behaviours for a good RSFO?
● Please give me an example of a specific situation where you saw outstanding performance from a RSFO. Exactly what happened? What were the behaviours/ things that marked out this as an example of excellent performance? and
● Please give me an example of a specific situation where you saw very poor performance from a RSFO. Exactly what happened? What were the behaviours/ things that marked out this as an example of very poor performance?

We hoped that it would be possible to build a model of the required personal qualities and attributes of an excellent TSO/ RSFO, and then to test this model objectively against some performance criteria. In this way, we felt that some power of prediction could be developed.

A number of potential key informants were identified and interviewed. Interviews were carried out mostly in focus groups, with a number of key individuals interviewed on a one-to-one basis. In order to make this research robust, a number of informant-groups were identified, including:
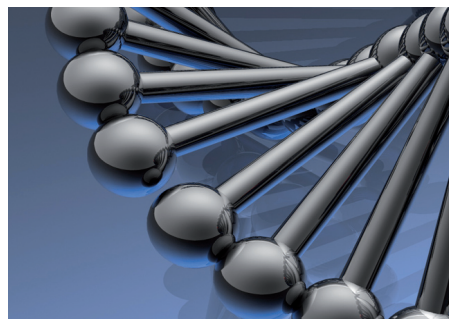● Trading standards and environmental health managers, in both rural and urban settings, working in different parts of the country;
● Trading standards and environmental health officers, in both rural and urban settings, working in different parts of the country; and
● Other groups of people from other regulatory services, such as licensing, building control and planning.

The project also received support

> **'Most people in the profession have views about the qualities and attributes of an excellent trading standards officer, but no-one had ever gone about researching them in any depth or with any rigour'**

with any rigour. The basis of a project was therefore formed – to research the critical success factors of an excellent trading standards officer and then to build robust selection assessments around them.

However, early in the life of the project, Steve suggested the idea should be extended to the wider regulatory services context, and that the aim of the project should be: To develop robust selection assessments for

from LACORS, the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, the Society of Chief Trading Standards Officers and the Improvement and Development Agency.

This research yielded some remarkably consistent findings, which enabled the construction of an initial model of the 'DNA of a good TSO/RSFO'.

THE MODEL

So far, the model contains five broad personality factors and an ability component as the key requirements, together with a 'work-style preference'. The five personality factors are:

● **Communication:** The ability to communicate in a clear and concise manner, both verbally and in writing, being aware of one's impact on others;

● **Assertiveness:** Being positive and convincing, advocating one's own view in a constructive way;

● **Professionalism**: Setting high standards for one's own work, bringing structure and organisation to a task or project, in order to achieve planned outcomes;

● **Commitment:** Demonstrates a strong commitment to the 'cause'; and

● **Pragmatism:** The ability to make planned and instinctive judgements, often in challenging circumstances, based on logic and previous experience.

The identified ability component is:

● **Written Comprehension/Deduction:** The ability to understand complex written information quickly and accurately and determine what follows logically from the information.

A 'work style preference' aspect has also been identified. Initial research is indicating that this aspect may not be part of the 'core DNA', but an additional personal preference, determined by other factors. It is possible that it might be a continuum, with an 'educational/facilitative' style at one end, and an 'enforcement' style at the other.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

Two initial assessments have now been designed and piloted, with the initial versions of both assessments having been refined via the piloting process. These refined versions are currently being validated at www.regu-test.co.uk. In order to ensure that the model is further developed and refined, and that the assessments derived from them are accurately designed, it will be important for at least a few hundred people to take them. Therefore, if you would like to contribute to this important and ground-breaking research, please go to the website, register and proceed to the
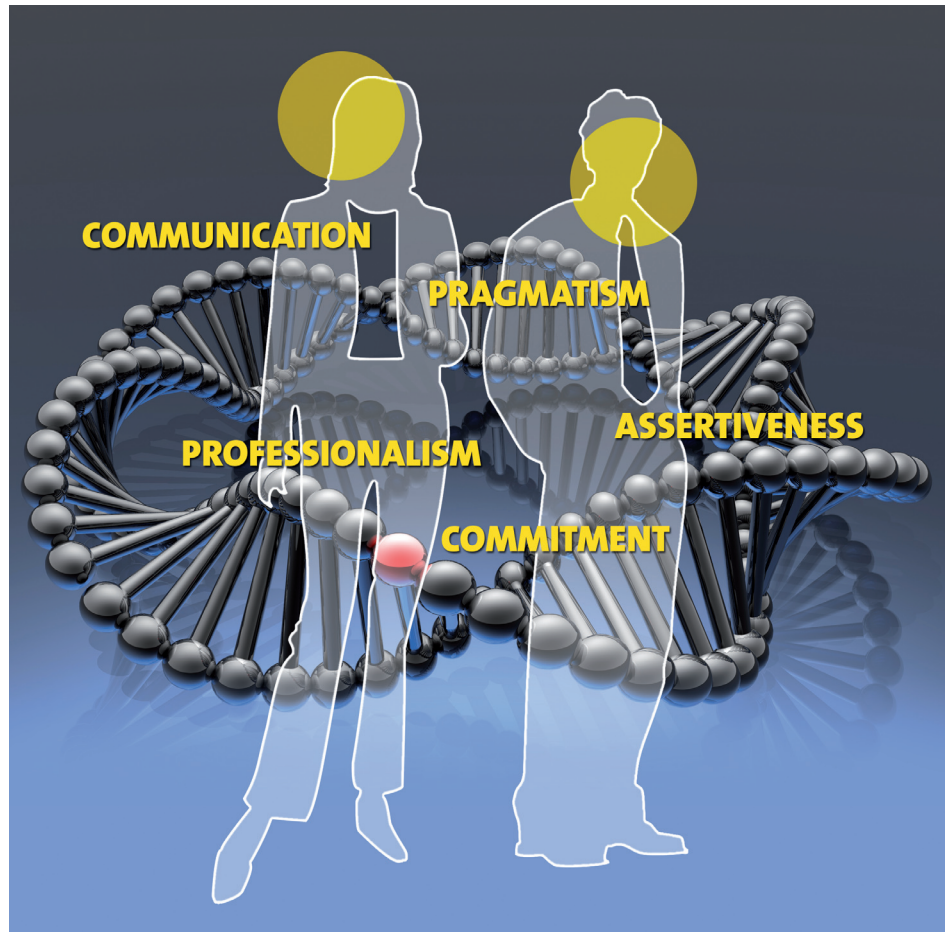
assessment pages. It takes about 30 minutes to complete both assessments.

We will formally launch the finalised assessments at the TSI Conference this month in Manchester. More information will be made available by EETSA, via both a conference mini-theatre session and a stand at the exhibition. The assessments should be available for use directly afterwards.

FUTURE PLANS

Once the 'DNA of a good TSO' has been confirmed by the successful conclusion of this project, and the initial psychometric assessments designed, it is hoped to be able to add some additional assessment methods to the initial 'tool box', with a follow-on project. It is anticipated that these might include:

● **A scoreable application form;**

● **Role-plays** – dealing with typical and challenging 'customer-interactions' or other suitable scenarios;

● **A structured behavioural interview** – based on the identified critical success factors;

● **An 'in-box' exercise** – sifting and prioritising multiple materials in limited time;

● **Case studies** – providing a critical analysis of multiple materials, often with the requirement to make

recommendations, again in limited time; and

● **Presentations** – presenting a compelling case to a critical audience.

SUMMARY

This project will ensure that regulatory services possess instruments that will better predict excellence and effectiveness in regulatory services practice, prior to the start of either training and/or employment. They will not only be an accurate means of selection, but also a fair means.

It is hoped that the initial psychometric assessments will be augmented with a suite of bespoke-designed additional instruments, which will further enhance the quality of decision-making at selection. This will make a significant contribution to driving up standards. It is also anticipated that this research will help provide an additional focus to development activities for employing services and their staff. Further information will be provided by EETSA, initially at the TSI Conference.

MORE INFORMATION: Please contact David Woollard on 0473 659654, or email: david@dwhr.co.uk. Relevant websites include www.eetsa.org.uk, www.dwhr.co.uk, www.blueedge.eu.com and www.regu-test.co.uk

To contribute to this research, visit www.regu-test.co.uk

COMMUNICATION

PRAGMATISM

ASSERTIVENESS

PROFESSIONALISM

COMMITMENT