

Portrait of Success

David Woollard has defined the characteristics of the perfect regulatory officer

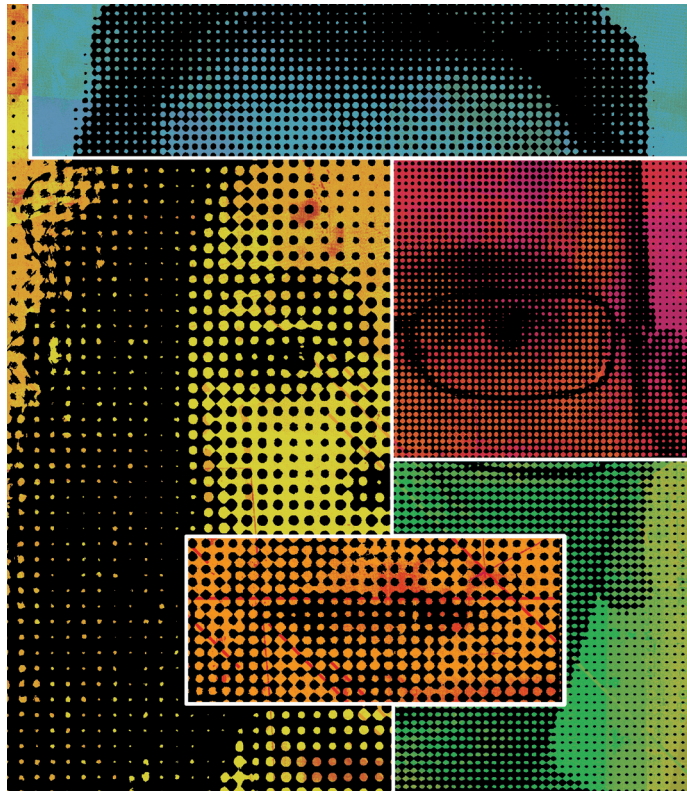
What makes an ideal EHP? The question arose in a discussion with Steve Greenfield, county trading standards officer for Suffolk, on how to increase the numbers and quality of people joining the regulatory services.

We considered the personal qualities and attributes that make up an excellent officer and what characteristics might pre-dispose someone to this kind of work. We found no-one had researched these questions with any rigour before. It was decided to use a psychometric approach to the problem.

A partner with appropriate expertise was needed and Paul Brewerton at Blue Edge Consulting was chosen. Funding came from The East of England Trading Standards Authority in May 2006. The project received support from the CIEH, Lacors, the Society of Chief Trading Standards Officers and the Improvement and Development Agency.

First, we identified a range of people from across the regulatory services in urban and rural settings, including licensing and building control officers, and carried out a series of structured focus groups and interviews.

Speaking to managers and frontline officers, we asked:



Perfect combination: five personality factors make the ideal regulatory officer

'We hope that the work will drive up standards'

- What are the key differences between a really good regulatory services field officer and an average one?
- What are the most important knowledge, skills and behaviours for a good regulatory officer?
- Give an example of a situation where you saw outstanding performance. What marked it out as excellent?
- Give an example of a situation where you saw very poor performance.

It was hoped it would be possible to build a model of the required personal qualities and attributes of an excellent regulatory services officer, then test this model objectively against some performance data. The research yielded some remarkably consistent findings.

We came up with 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 own view in a constructive way.


- **Professionalism.** Setting high standards for own work, bringing structure and organisation to a task or project, to achieve planned outcomes.

- **Commitment.** Demonstrating strong commitment.

- **Pragmatism.** The ability to make planned and instinctive judgements, based on logic and previous experience.

The ability component is the ability to understand complex written information quickly and accurately and determine what follows logically from the information. We also identified the presence in officers of a work style preference. This may not be part of the core DNA, but an additional characteristic, determined by other factors. The preference normally lies along a continuum, with an educational-based style at one end, and an enforcement-based style at the other.

Now the DNA of a good regulatory officer has been confirmed by this initial project and the psychometric assessment constructed it is hoped to be able to add some additional features to the initial toolbox. These might include a scoreable application form, role-plays on dealing with challenging customer interactions, a structured behavioural interview and case studies and presentations.

We hope to put together a 360° feedback version of the assessment soon and a custom-designed development programme, focusing on the 'core DNA' we have described. Over time, we hope the work will make a significant contribution to driving up standards in the regulatory services professions. 

The assessment, known as the Regulatory Services Test is available for use at www.regu-test.co.uk. David Woollard runs the David Woollard HR consultancy. Tel: 01473 659654. Email: david@dwhr.co.uk. See: www.dwhr.co.uk

Help the research

To ensure the underlying model is further refined and developed, and the assessments derived from them are accurately designed, it will be important for as many environmental health practitioners as possible to take them.

To contribute to this research, please go to the website, www.regu-test.co.uk, click on the Click Here to Register button in the bottom left-hand corner of the screen, then enter CL1009 in the Project Code box. Then, follow the on-screen instructions. It takes about 35 minutes to complete the full assessment. It would also be extremely useful if you could obtain your manager's assistance with this, by getting them to agree to provide some performance data about you. This is done via a very short questionnaire.

The information you provide will be treated with the strictest confidence and only used for research purposes. It will, under no circumstances, be disclosed to anyone other than the researcher.