



# **SUMMARY OF THE REPORT**

## **on personnel problems in the United Nations**

**(Professional category and above)**

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*by*  
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**Geneva**  
**August 1972**

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Note

In response to numerous requests, the attached document presents a summary of the report on personnel problems in the United Nations (professional category and above), of which the original full text was published under the symbol A/8454 (Parts I and II). It is pointed out, however, that inasmuch as the parent document sets out to lay a very detailed working basis for the application of a reform, there are long passages in it which cannot be summarized.

Consequently the structure of this summary does not strictly imitate that of the report;<sup>1/</sup> part I describes the existing situation and states the grounds for reform, and part II sets out the possible principles and content of the proposed reform, commenting on and explaining the 20 proposals made in the report.

It must also be pointed out that the report deals only with the United Nations and not with the specialized agencies, although it is likely that some of the suggestions made in it may prove of interest - subject to further studies - to the organizations of the United Nations family as a whole.

The text in square brackets consists of comments which were thought essential either to clarify the summary or to bring it up to date.

(Signed) M. Bertrand  
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<sup>1/</sup> The necessary cross-references are given mainly by quoting, in brackets the relevant paragraph numbers of the report.

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SUMMARY

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PART I. - THE EXISTING SITUATION AND THE GROUNDS FOR REFORM

The five observations which follow sum up the situation and state the case for reform.

- 1) The prevailing general dissatisfaction appears to be due mainly to the existence of a grave crisis of modernization (chapter I)

This dissatisfaction is in evidence among the delegations of Member States (8-9), among the chief Directors of the Secretariat (10) and in the staff associations (11). The criticisms expressed by the Directors (10-15, annex I.1) reveal a deep-seated uneasiness, and show that the inadequate solution of personnel problems is a fundamental obstacle to the performance of the tasks conferred on the Organization. The fact that a body originally planned as a mere conference secretariat has grown in 25 years into a very large and highly complex civil service is the most likely explanation for the gravity of the crisis of modernization which is found to exist (13-14). The main symptoms of this crisis are serious difficulties of recruitment, particularly in the economic and technical divisions, and uneasiness about the use of new techniques (17). Yet it is impossible to formulate a personnel policy without definite ideas as to the degree of technical complexity and the nature of the technical methods necessary to the healthy operation of a modern civil service (18-23). Moreover, the crisis is not confined to the international civil service. It is a world-wide phenomenon and affects developed as well as developing countries; but that is a further reason for the United Nations to try to reform itself and at the same time to organize international co-operation in the matter (24-27).

- 2) The essential characteristics of the Professional staff of the United Nations confirm the existence of this crisis (chapter II)

The fact that the Professional staff have a high average age and an inadequate average level of university training is the most serious feature of a situation which needs changing quickly. The essential facts are as follows:

The Professional category comprises some 3,000 staff members, one-fifth of whom are women and three-quarters of whom are permanent career officials. The great majority (more than 70 per cent) are over 40 years of age, and the younger element (those under 30 years of age) represent only 4 per cent of the total (45-48). As to the level of university training, only 65 per cent of the staff appear to have studied up to first degree level (i.e. to have received three or more years of higher education) and over 25 per cent seem never to have attended an establishment of higher education (51).

A clearer picture of the situation is obtained by analysing the Professional staff into "vocational groups". The three main vocational groups are the administrative generalists (23.6 per cent), the sociologists and economists (23.4 per cent) and the language staff (21 per cent). The remaining groups are the statisticians, political affairs officers, legal affairs officers, accountants and auditors, librarians, and engineers (53-55).

So far as age and university education are concerned, the situation varies markedly from one group to another. The economists and language staff are noticeably younger and have a higher level of university education than the administrative generalists. On the other hand, the last-named group presents very pronounced characteristics with regard to age (73 per cent are over 40 years of age, 4 per cent under 30 years of age) and university level (more than one-third have no university education and 44 per cent have not reached degree level); yet this group, in which the majority (53 per cent) of staff are from Western Europe and North America, is responsible for the overall functioning of the Secretariat. This, therefore, is the group which stands in the greatest and most urgent need of efforts to lower the average age and to raise the level of general culture and technical skill (73).

3) The Office of Personnel cannot solve the problems with its existing equipment and methods (chapter III)

Unfortunately the Office of Personnel does not seem to me to be equipped to effect any rapid reforms. It should be noted that all the Professional staff of the Office fall within the group whose characteristics were last described in the preceding paragraph. Moreover, despite fairly substantial resources (its budget for 1970 totalled \$6,360,800 or 3.3 per cent of the overall United Nations budget, and it comprises 119 Professional posts and 239 General Service posts), 1/ the Office faces serious administrative difficulties, including in particular:

The lack of a supply of information to the Office of the Director (the necessary data are neither collected nor processed, and there is no "instrument panel"); the fact that the Director of Personnel himself and his chief assistants are forced to devote far too much of their time to investigating individual problems; the lack of a manual setting out all the rules and regulations clearly and fully in a single document; the absence of a solution to the problem of decentralization and centralization of authority; and the severe inadequacy of methodology for recruitment, for reporting on performance, for training and for promotion (75-95).

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1/ \$2 million, or slightly less than one-third, represents the expenditure of the Technical Assistance Recruitment Service.

4) The present methods of recruitment are inadequate (chapter IV, part I)

The United Nations recruits an average of 327 Professional staff a year (this figure is based on the data for 1965-1969; the actual figures varied between 199 in 1965 and 474 in 1969). Sixty to 65 per cent of recruitment operations take place in New York, the remainder being divided between Geneva, Vienna and the three regional economic commissions (97-98). The procedures employed at present exhibit the following characteristics:

- Interpreters and translators are the only staff for whom a recruitment method has been developed; this is based on competitive examination and provides firm guarantees of professional ability in the staff recruited (103-105). The same, unfortunately, does not apply to the recruitment of other vocational groups. In these cases:
- The decision as to what posts to fill by external recruitment is not reached on clearly defined criteria; generally speaking, each case is dealt with as and when it arises (106-111);
- Information on vacant posts is conveyed through a systems of circulars which receive a restricted distribution; vacancies are given virtually no publicity (112-114);
- The recruitment procedure does not provide for consideration of enough candidates per post. In the majority of cases only one candidate is considered and accepted; this practice is bound to have a very serious effect on the average calibre of the successful candidates (115-116);
- Virtually no use is made of the recruitment roster (117-118);
- A study of the sources of recruitment confirms that there is not enough active prospecting for candidates (119-121);
- The method of compiling job descriptions is unsuited to the actual requirements (122-128);
- Recruitment operations are far too protracted (lasting an average of 9-10 months) (129-130);
- Lastly, the regular annual practice whereby a number of General Service staff are recruited to the Professional category near the end of their career has been one of the main factors in the aging of the Professional staff and in its lack of qualifications (425-429).

Procedures of this kind are utterly unsystematic and are bound to produce unsatisfactory results.



5) Methods of reporting on performance, of promotion and of professional training are also very unsatisfactory (chapter V, part I)

The situation in this respect is as follows:

A. The reporting system satisfies no one and is very difficult to use. The system is very precise in theory, being based on periodic reports which present a detailed analysis of professional qualities; in practice it is ineffective because supervisors do not use identical methods of evaluation and most evaluations are, on the whole, too flattering (233-234).

B. The promotion machinery suffers from the traditional defects of its kind. Here again, a system which seems rational in organization (Appointment and Promotion Board and Committee - Staff Rule 104.14), and which is staffed by persons of indisputable competence and devotion, has very serious defects, by the admission of the very people involved in working it. Owing to the shortcomings of the reporting system, no one can form an accurate idea of the real merits of the candidates under consideration; this situation is clearly not conducive to a proper climate of incentives. Under this system, moreover, career organization for Professional staff members is left to chance, since the authority of the Board and the Committee does not extend to this and there is no recognized method of assigning or placing staff (235-246).

C. The system of professional training is limited officially to language training; training in subjects other than languages is still on a token scale and carried on as a semi-clandestine activity (247-250).

Such, in essentials, are the main comments prompted by consideration of the whole machinery of staff recruitment and management in the Professional category; to the author's mind, this situation obviously calls for drastic reform.

However, before going on to examine possible solutions we should mention that, generally speaking, the existing political and financial constraints have hitherto placed major restrictions on the scope for initiative in the Office of Personnel, and that the critical balance-sheet drawn up here has been compiled with the help of the Director of Personnel himself and of his entire Office, who are the first to desire fundamental changes in the methods they have at present to follow.

PART II - POSSIBLE PRINCIPLES AND CONTENT OF THE PROPOSED REFORM

In order to deal with the situation described above, a reform must at the very least provide clear definitions of a number of basic concepts; make it possible to assemble the basic data needed for forecasting; lay down a set of new methods for recruitment, reporting, promotion and assignment; modernize administrative structures and methods in general; and indicate what adjustments must be made in the grade and pay structure to make the new system work harmoniously.

The twenty proposals made in the report in an endeavour to furnish solutions to these problems have been grouped under the following six headings:

- 1) The need for a new definition of basic concepts (Recommendations Nos. 1 and 13; end of chapter I; chapter V, part III; chapter VII, paras. 430-431)

Any reorganization must start out by defining some basic concepts. There can be no modernization without raising the level of technical qualifications. Steps can be taken to raise this level only after an accurate inventory has been made of the functions to be performed - in fact, of the various professions of which the Professional category is composed. Reporting, promotion and assignment cannot be properly organized unless it is clear what a career post is and an average rate of advancement can be determined. Nor can international co-operation in the civil service be organized without developing a system of secondment. These considerations prompt the following recommendations:

- The concept of the "vocational group" (a list of such groups is given in part I, section (2) above) should be defined as meaning all staff members competent to practise one of the professions corresponding to the various types of activities which are carried on by Professional staff in the Secretariat and which appear in a list drawn up by the Secretary-General;
- The level of qualifications should be understood to mean the degree of competence prescribed by the Secretary-General for the practice of one of the professions of the Professional staff in the Secretariat at entry grade level and at other grade levels, and these requirements should be specified in "standard descriptions of qualifications", to be used instead of "job descriptions";
- "Career posts" should mean posts designated by the Secretary-General as posts always to be filled by internal promotion;
- An average rate of advancement should be calculated and determined; that is to say, the minimum, maximum and average period for a staff member in a particular vocational group to spend at each grade level should be officially fixed;

- Steps should be taken to institute a system of alternating secondments (430-431). In order to facilitate international co-operation in the civil service and to make it easier to second national officials to international organizations, Staff Rule 104.13 should be amended to provide that, by way of exception, a number of staff members holding permanent appointments may be authorized by the Secretary-General to suspend their service with the United Nations for periods of up to five years in order to resume employment in their national civil service. Agreements concerning the system of secondment of national civil servants should be concluded between the Secretary-General and the Governments of Member States which so wish.

The adoption of these definitions and arrangements would demonstrate the desire to supplement the traditional principles of independence, of seeking "the highest standards of efficiency, competence, and integrity" and of equitable geographical distribution - which are the basis of the international civil service - with additional principles - backed by twenty-five years' experience of the operation of the international agencies - of modernization and maximum administrative efficiency, and of co-operation between national civil services (28-29 and 30-40).

- 2) The modernization of recruitment methods (Recommendations Nos. 2, 3, 5, 14 and 15; chapter IV, parts II, III, IV and V)

A. Long-term recruitment plan

The prerequisite for devising new methods is a clear view of what is involved: or, in other words, the possibility of compiling basic data reliable enough for medium-term and long-term forecasts. The report describes at some length (131-161 and annex V) possible methods of drawing up a long-term recruitment plan, an essential basic document designed to determine, several years in advance, the number of posts to be filled by recruitment each year in each of the vocational groups to which Professional staff in the Secretariat belong. Such a plan should distinguish at least four main levels of qualifications - junior, first-stage professional experience, great professional experience, and management - and should lead to a progressive and sizeable increase in recruitment at the junior level.

√The Office of the Director of Personnel has carried out preparatory work on the long-term recruitment plan during 1972, and the Secretary-General will submit a document to the General Assembly this year proposing an initial plan for 1973-1977.√

B. The institution of junior competitive examinations for the administrative generalists' group and the economists' group

Provided that certain conditions are met, there is nothing utopian about the idea of recruitment by competitive examination to junior posts in the largest vocational groups, in which the "standard descriptions of qualifications" are easy to establish. To adopt this procedure would be consistent with Staff Regulation 4.3 and would comply with General Assembly resolution 2736 (XXV) of 17 December 1970 (162-169).

The report makes it clear at the outset that all the obstacles to the holding of such competitive examinations on a world-wide basis - problems in the composition of boards of examiners, practical arrangements for the examinations, language problems, problems of homogeneity of culture and so on - disappear if the idea is scaled down to the regional level, on the understanding that large countries could easily be treated as separate regions. The report recommends that senior officials of the Secretariat and senior national civil servants should be brought together on the boards of examiners with the most highly qualified representatives of universities; that the practical arrangements should be such as to make it as convenient as possible for candidates to sit the examinations; that the tests chosen should provide a means of assessing the candidates' ability to express themselves in speech and in writing, their level of general culture and their technical and linguistic knowledge; that the examinations should be so organized as to give greater opportunities to countries at present under-represented; and that a special budgetary appropriation should be made for the competitive examinations to be advertised as widely as possible (170-188).

[To my knowledge the Secretariat has already started a practical study of this important problem and, on a trial basis, negotiations have been opened with a view to organizing competitive examinations in severely under-represented countries. Various arrangements have been considered.]

C. Negotiation with UNDP for the establishment of a preliminary training scheme

Since the introduction of competitive examinations must not in any sense operate to the disadvantage of the least-developed countries which find it hardest to recruit their own national civil services, negotiations should be started with UNDP for the establishment of a pre-recruitment training programme in the form of a system of fellowships to train competent specialists in public administration and economics in particular (466).

D. Compilation of a reserve recruitment roster

For purposes of recruitment above the junior level (in grades P-3 and above) in order that a specific demand for specialists may be met at any moment and new blood may be introduced from outside from time to time, it is also necessary to take great care in checking qualifications, if only to avoid recruiting at these levels persons whose qualifications are inferior to those of the juniors recruited by competitive examination (189-192).

The only suitable modern method of meeting such requirements is to establish a reserve recruitment roster on the basis of large-scale advertising carried on in agreement with Governments on the basis of "standard descriptions of qualifications" drawn up according to a strict pattern. Arrangements should be made for automatic sorting of candidates on the roster, and a method should be devised for keeping the roster continuously up to date.

This whole scheme should be supplemented by more systematic organization of interviews with selected candidates (193-201).

E. Discontinuance of recruitment of General Service staff to the Professional category at the end of their career, and reorganization of the General Service category

The steps advocated above - competitive examinations, and recruitment on the basis of a verified level of qualifications - would of necessity put an end to the practice of recruiting General Service staff, near the end of their career, to the Professional category with no other requirement as to qualifications than their seniority. Consequently the restructuring already considered for the General Service category through the creation of additional grades above the present G-5 grade should be carried out as soon as possible; however, the posts created should be limited in number and kept strictly for staff possessing the requisite technical qualifications (425-429).

F. Other recommendations concerning recruitment

The report contains two further recommendations concerning:

- Methods of recruitment to the highest posts (Under-Secretary-General and Assistant Secretary-General), where rules guaranteeing the candidates' technical calibre should be complied with (202-208 and 465);
- The introduction of non-renewable fixed-term appointments on special terms of remuneration to facilitate the recruitment, for a specified period, of specialists with exceptionally high qualifications (441-444 and 475).

3) The organization of professional training (Recommendation No. 10)

In the modern world, continuous professional training has become an indispensable tool for maintaining the requisite level of technical competence. Consequently a comprehensive in-service training programme should be prepared and put into operation. Such a programme should:

- Be based on a precise specification of the level of knowledge desirable in order to obtain the maximum return;
- Comprise refresher training, advanced theoretical training, development of professional background knowledge, acquisition of all-round knowledge, and acquisition of further knowledge of languages;
- Include the preparation of textbooks and annotated bibliographies, oral instruction and study leave;

- Be sanctioned by qualifying examinations leading to the award of "certificates" which would be taken into account for promotion purposes;
- Be planned in the light of individual assignment and training plans.

The report gives specific examples showing models of possible programmes (286-325).

4) Change in the "climate of incentives" (Recommendations Nos. 7, 8, 9 and 12)

The proposals made in this connexion relate to the problems which, for many reasons, are the hardest to tackle. For the problems of reporting and of promotion machinery, no civil service has ever found a perfect solution which could be quoted as an example. The expression "career planning" covers more theoretical ideas than available practical models (257-285 and 336-342).

[In any event, in the present case the divergent attitudes of Member States to the very concept of careers for international civil servants complicate this aspect of the matter even further. The report is based on the observed fact that a very large proportion of the staff are career officials and that, even if this proportion were reduced, it would still be a basic component of the Secretariat; further, the report is based on the idea that the proposal concerning "alternating secondments" might make it possible to organize combined careers - part in national civil service and part in the international civil service - to which the main proposals mentioned below might be adapted.]

In view of these difficulties the report proposes, in order to remedy the serious shortcomings noted in part I:

A. The establishment of a Personnel Inspectorate

The report explains how a small group of personnel inspectors, recruited for preference from among the most experienced senior officials and appointed by the Secretary-General from a list selected by two successive electoral colleges, might be established on relatively economical and undoubtedly efficient lines. The effectiveness of the set of measures proposed below depends on the establishment of a body of this sort (257-264).

B. The adoption of a new system of marking (and of promotion)

This new system should comprise:

- The establishment of a special model "periodic report" for each vocational group;

- A method of classification at two levels: classification by the unit chief (of the Professional staff members in a particular grade and vocational group working under him) and classification by the inspector (of all Professional staff members in the same vocational group within a section of a grade).

These classifications would be carried out every two years. The results should be aggregated according to a definite code so as to give each staff member a total number of "points" which, subject to the evaluations of the Training and Career Planning Committees and the Appointment and Promotion Board, could be used to establish an order of presentation for promotion (265-268).

C. The institution of an assignment planning system (with contractual standard plans)

The report describes specifically how an assignment planning system, based on the method of "standard plans" and operated by a Career Planning Unit, might work. Such a system should be based on:

- A precise definition of types of assignments (see Recommendation No. 1A(c));
- Calculation of the number of man-years per type of assignment;
- Individual standard career plans offered by the Organization to each Professional staff member and comprising mutual (i.e. contractual) commitments for a period of six years and non-contractual indications for a longer period.

The introduction of such a system is the only way to institute the rational rotation of Professional staff members - between units, between agencies, and between headquarters and the field <sup>1/</sup> - which has so often been recommended in the past; such a rotation would afford very valuable training and would be very effective (269-285).

D. The establishment of Training and Career Planning Committees.  
New definition of the powers of the Appointment and Promotion Board

The Training and Career Planning Committees whose establishment is proposed in the report provide the essential sinews for the operation of the system; for this purpose, every staff member's files and qualifications must be thoroughly known at all times, so that developments in the Secretariat can be kept under continuous review.

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<sup>1/</sup> /and possibly between national civil services and the international service/.

Such a system requires that:

- These Committees should be composed of eminent specialists in the professional field in question, chosen from outside the Organization; representatives of those substantive departments which have the largest numbers of staff members in the vocational group in question; the personnel inspectors of the vocational group; representatives of the staff in the vocational group, nominated by their colleagues; and representatives of the Office of Personnel;
- The terms of reference of these Committees should include setting the level of qualifications and approving the standard descriptions of qualifications; formulating general policy with regard to training and drawing up the corresponding programme for the vocational group concerned; determining what textbooks and annotated bibliographies should be prepared; supervising the activities of the Training Service; studying and approving the general assignment plans; and studying, for each vocational group, the promotion proposals based on the inspectors' marks (336-338).

The Appointment and Promotion Board, in addition to its present functions, should be responsible for:

- Approving policy with regard to training;
- Approving the long-term recruitment plan and the long-term assignment plan;
- The general formulation of personnel policy (339-342).

The Board should be augmented by two specialists selected from the Training Committees whenever it deals with training problems, and should be permanently augmented by two personnel inspectors nominated by their colleagues.

5) Modernization of administrative methods (Recommendations Nos. 11 and 19)

The report advocates a drastic modernization of existing administrative methods through the adoption of a computerized, integrated system of personnel management. A detailed description of a possible system designed to provide a "permanent instrument panel" is given in chapter VI of the report (345-401 and annexes VI.1 to VI.8). It would probably serve little purpose to summarize those technical passages. It should perhaps be mentioned, however, that the chapter contains inter alia a description of a method of making international comparisons between university levels for the purpose of recruiting Professional staff. The proposals for a structural reorganization of the Office of Personnel (chapter VII, 450-457) can also be placed under the heading of modernization of administrative methods.



6) Reorganization of the grade and salary structure. Modernization of the Staff Rules (Recommendations Nos. 16, 17 and 18)

√The proposal made under these headings is not intended to encroach upon the jurisdiction of the competent bodies, such as ICSAB or the Special Committee for the Review of the United Nations Salary System, but merely to stress points connected with those problems which have a direct bearing on the proposed reform.√

These proposals are essentially concerned with:

A. Reconsideration of the connexion between post and grade (432-440)

In order that the concept of "level of qualifications" may be instituted in a rational way, the Secretary-General should decide:

- That it is possible for a staff member to change grade while continuing to hold the same post and perform the same duties;
- That the grade is an internal division of the level of qualifications;
- That consideration should therefore be given to a change in the numerical structure of grades, so as to provide two grades per level of qualifications.

If there are four levels (Recommendation No. 1 B), the basic university level should correspond to grades P-1 and P-2; the level of first-stage professional experience to grades P-3 and P-4; the level of great professional experience to grades P-5 and P-6; and the management level to grades D-1 and D-2. This would entail creating an additional grade (P-6).

B. Reorganization of the system of allowances (Recommendation No. 17)

The purpose of this proposal is to draw the attention of the competent organs to a situation which severely penalizes certain categories of staff members, particularly those with dependants. It is therefore recommended that careful consideration should be given to the feasibility of reorganizing the system of allowances, with particular attention to the merits of a system of expatriation allowances and the establishment of a more equitable system for staff with dependants, through changes in the existing combination of dependency allowances and education grants, and in the method of computing post adjustments, within the present budgetary appropriations for remuneration as a whole (445-446).

C. General modernization of the Staff Rules (chapter VII, 447-448)

In order to give legal embodiment to the proposed reform and bring the existing texts up to date, consideration should be given to the idea of revising the Staff Rules, inter alia by the inclusion of rules on training and career planning, the definition of vocational groups, career posts and levels of qualifications, the proposed new conditions for recruitment, and the changes in methods of marking, inspection and promotion recommended in this report.

To give effect to the reform, the report advocates (Recommendation No.20) that a task force should be set up and suggests that a round table should be convened (458-460).

[No plans for setting up the task force are being considered for the time being, mainly for reasons of economy. However, the Director of Personnel has assigned a staff member in grade D-1 to implement those recommendations which are within the Secretary-General's competence or are based on earlier resolutions of the General Assembly. The Secretary-General submitted his preliminary comments on the report (A/8545) on 3 December 1971 and the Advisory Committee, in its report (A/8552), authorized follow-up studies. Last year the General Assembly accordingly made an appropriation of \$25,000 for the employment of consultants. This made it possible, inter alia, to prepare the long-term recruitment plan needed as a basis for organizing the competitive examinations and the reserve roster. However, there is still a great deal of work to be done in order to give effect to the whole reform if it is approved by the General Assembly.]