

Purpose and Method of Service Ratings

By GENE HUNTLEY
State Civil Service Commission

The Value of Service Ratings

There is probably no personnel practice so widely and consistently used in both public and private employment as the rating in one form or another of the efficiency of employees. Well over a century ago the British social reformer, Robert Owen, innovated one of the earliest service ratings, which was used in his cotton mill at the New Lanark model community. Blocks of wood—with a different color on each side representing an evaluation from poor to excellent—were placed periodically on each worker's bench or machine with the appropriate color displayed.

Since that time a multitude of rating methods have been devised—some simple, others intricate—but all directed toward the same end: evaluating the efficiency or productivity of an employee's service. At the present, service or merit ratings continue as one of the most widely used devices of management despite repeated question as to their accuracy or validity.

Much of the criticism arises from either misunderstanding or lack of appreciation of the limit and scope of such devices and of crediting them with more than they are able to accomplish. Actually, even the most involved of these processes is far from being "scientific." In evaluating the performance of human beings on the basis of such traits as initiative, reliability, honesty, leadership, perspective, et. al., it is found that there are no absolute objective standards to afford an exact measurement of these factors. It is difficult to measure in terms of units those qualities which do not lend themselves readily to measurement. The problems encountered here are precisely those found in evaluating a painting or musical composition. The qualities are not subject to measurement in a mathematical sense. The very best to be hoped for is experienced judgment.

Much of the success of a rating system depends on the care, sincerity, and understanding of the purpose of the rating on the part of the supervisor; and an appreciation on the part of the employees of the problems encountered in rating large numbers of people.

Perhaps the chief value, then, of a well designed service rating is to provide a uniform and detailed method of expressing opinion regarding employees on a *comparative* basis, since an *absolute* basis is not possible. Most of us work for somebody; we have supervisors. And all of us are rated in one way or another—usually informally at unpredictable intervals. Often it is a casual as "Joe is a good man," or "Mary is very slow to catch on." The service rating, if it is properly constructed, forces the supervisor to do several things in expressing his opinion: (1) put it in writing, (2) use the same detailed factors in evaluating all employees, (3) use the same factors as all other supervisors in the jurisdiction, (4) present the written rating to the employee and discuss it with him, and (5) have his opinion subject to the scrutiny of his department head and to that of an impartial personnel agency. It is a vehicle of predetermined uniform design for expressing the opinion of human beings about the activity of other human beings.

The value to administrators is obvious: the service rating, combined with length of service is an aid in determining salary increases, layoffs, demotions, promotions, transfers, and dismissals.

Types of Service Ratings

The variety of rating scales in use in industry and the public service is almost endless. Brief, very general mention can be made of the broad categories of ratings.

The man-to-man rating method was used in the first World War in rating officers. Various men who represented a certain trait in differing degrees were given appropriate values, and then all