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Security Sweep

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In just one year, a small band of Transportation Department officials marshaled a team of contractors to hire 61,000 employees and place them at 429 airports across the country.

In 2002, a small band of Transportation Department executives built a workforce of federal baggage screeners from scratch. Hundreds of small steps that normally take months or weeks were compressed into weeks or days. They included writing job descriptions; developing tests to find people with the right skills; publicizing job openings; conducting background checks; developing training curricula; and scheduling employees for work, processing their paperwork and getting them on payroll.

By December 2002, the effort had racked up \$600 million in hiring costs and \$200 million for training, plus hundreds of millions more for deployment. In the process, TSA officials and contractors handled 1.7 million applications and provided 2.4 million hours of classroom training and 3.9 million hours of on-the-job training. The 2,000 on-the-job trainers spent more than 217,000 nights in hotels, and used 16,000 airplane tickets traveling the country to prepare the new workforce. Outfitting the new employees took 60,000 uniforms made to individual specifications. It took a temporary contract workforce of thousands—logisticians, trainers, human resources specialists, data entry clerks, travel agents, security personnel and more—to get the screeners hired, trained and placed in airports.

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“On this morning one year ago, the TSA was nothing more than a piece of paper,” Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta said on Nov. 18, 2002. “Tomorrow morning, TSA’s new federal passenger screeners will be on duty at every airport in America.”

The creation of the TSA screener corps, the largest human resources task in federal civilian history, is a story of innovation, frustration, heroic work—and high costs.

IN THE BEGINNING

President Bush set the TSA in motion when he signed the Aviation and Transportation Security Act on Nov. 19, 2001, two months after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. The law required the Transportation Department to hire a new passenger- and baggage-screening workforce for the nation’s airports. The move came in response to concerns about a string of investigations that had shown the existing contract workers often had allowed fliers to carry dangerous items onto airplanes. Investigators also found contractors had massive turnover problems—a 105 percent annual attrition rate on average—probably due to low pay and poor training.

Congress and the president gave Transportation a year, until Nov. 19, 2002, to create a better-paid, better-trained, more stable screening workforce from scratch. Officials initially estimated they’d need 30,000 screeners, but the actual number ended up being 60,000. The government never before has hired so many people so quickly, except when preparing for or engaging in war.

Transportation Secretary Mineta and his deputy, Michael Jackson, kicked off the operation, along with John Magaw, the first TSA administrator. Their early decisions shaped the effort.

Mineta, Jackson and Magaw decided that TSA would meet the deadline under any circumstances—no excuses. That created a sense of urgency; seven 16-hour workdays a week became the norm. “There was never any discussion that we wouldn’t get it done,” says one former TSA consultant.

The Transportation leaders also decreed the new workforce would provide world-class security and customer service. That meant substantial planning had to be done before hiring could start because such standards for airport security did not yet exist. The planning cut into the time left for hiring and training new workers. What’s more, the security and service goals were more ambitious than those spelled out in law—legislators had only set security requirements. The tougher goals complicated tests for applicants and training for new

hires.

The officials also decided that the Transportation Department simply did not have, and could not generate, the talent and logistical expertise to pull off the massive TSA hiring project. TSA would rely on the private sector for that effort and for any work not considered at the core of its mission. It was an ironic move considering that TSA's task was to federalize a contractor workforce. Concerns about the lack of professionalism and high turnover among contract screeners apparently didn't extend to the contractors that would be hired to support federalization.

Mineta also recruited several private sector executives to work for him temporarily during the TSA buildup. Kip Hawley, an executive with Arzoon, a San Mateo, Calif.-based transportation logistics company, was brought on to oversee the design of the new agency. Cliff Hardt, a vice president at FedEx, was brought on to help build the screener workforce. Gale Rossides, a Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms training veteran, and Pamela Pearson, a National Transportation Safety Board human resources executive, came aboard to make day-to-day operational and policy decisions.

PRESSURE BUILDS

At the beginning of February 2002, TSA hired the National Skills Standards Board, a little-known quasi-governmental agency connected to the Labor Department, to develop the standards for screeners. The board's Elizabeth Kolmstetter, a standards expert, tapped into a network of medical experts, industrial psychologists and trainers to come up with job descriptions and develop skills tests. Human Performance Standards, of Beltsville, Md., came up with physical tests. For example, the company built boxes that candidates would have to lift repeatedly to test their ability to handle repetitive motions. Other boxes held objects candidates would have to identify by touch. The team developed tests to determine whether candidates could work under pressure, whether they had good listening and speaking skills and whether they met English comprehension requirements. They also developed a test to determine how well people could identify objects on X-ray monitors.

Paul Squires, a Morristown, N.J.-based industrial psychologist involved in the screener project, says such efforts normally take three to four months in the private sector and six months in the public sector. The standards board team developed job descriptions and testing procedures for the screeners in one month.

While the board did its work, TSA officials evaluated contractor proposals for handling the overall hiring effort. TSA sought a company that could recruit candidates nationwide, assess candidates across the country, operate a small call center to handle questions from applicants and hire 30,000 screeners.

On March 4, TSA hired NCS Pearson, a firm based in Eden Prairie, Minn., for an estimated \$103 million. The award surprised many contractors and government officials familiar with federal human resources because NCS Pearson had little experience conducting federal HR work. Critics contended that no firm without previous experience would be able to handle the paper trail requirements, rules and the need for extensive demographic data in standard formats required in federal hiring. But TSA's leaders were determined to avoid standard federal procedures, since the aviation law freed them from federal hiring regulations and allowed them to adopt a private sector model.

NCS Pearson leaders were confident. The company had assessment centers across the country. Its officers saw TSA's requirement to hire 30,000 screeners in 32 weeks as daunting, but achievable. As time went on, the company also hired a host of former and retired federal human resources specialists to help get the job done.

To kick off the hiring, TSA officials decided to have NCS Pearson hire a mobile team to train new hires at one airport and then move on to the next, starting in the Northeast and moving to the South, the Southwest, the West and, finally, the Midwest. The first 300 members of what would eventually become a 3,000-person mobile training team arrived for training at the FAA Academy in Oklahoma City in late March.

As mobile team members were trained in Oklahoma City and then began the first airport setup at Baltimore/Washington International Airport, Transportation executives began to change the scope of the screener project, which delayed full-scale hiring. Because of requirements in the law and lessons about staffing requirements and training learned at BWI, TSA officials doubled the scope of the project between March, when they awarded the contract to NCS Pearson, and June, when the hiring actually got under way. Now, instead of 30,000 screeners, TSA wanted NCS Pearson to hire 60,000 people not only to screen passengers, but checked baggage as well. TSA also wanted NCS Pearson to hire 2,400 field managers and administrative staff, a totally new requirement. And instead of a 25-person call center, TSA now sought one staffed by 2,200 people. The delays meant hiring would be condensed from 32 weeks to 13.

TSA also decided not to use NCS Pearson's assessment centers. Instead, TSA wanted NCS Pearson to set up temporary centers in hotels near each of the airports where screeners would work. That decision proved costly, since NCS Pearson had to set up secure temporary computer networks, hire temporary staff, provide security, rent hotel space and pay the travel costs of a roving band of assessment center managers.

Meanwhile, outside pressure on the agency grew. News media questioned whether TSA officials knew what they were doing. Lawmakers criticized slow hiring. Only 600 screeners—part of the training team that insiders called the “mobile screener force” had been hired by mid-April. On April 17, Transportation Inspector General Kenneth Mead told Congress that TSA needed more screeners and more money than it had anticipated—projected costs had increased from \$2.4 billion to \$6.8 billion in six months and showed no signs of topping out. “Clearly, TSA will require a large infusion of cash,” Mead said. His estimate for hiring, training and deployment of screeners was \$411 million. That would prove to be well below the actual cost.

THE RACE IS ON

Goaded by massive media coverage, NCS Pearson launched a recruitment effort that brought in a staggering number of applicants. The company held 89 job fairs in 56 cities, netting 83,898 job seekers, and recruited on the Internet as well. Those efforts and TSA's campaign to attract local media attention to draw people to job postings on Monster.com brought 6 million page views. By November, TSA had received 1.7 million applications for screening jobs, as many as if every resident of Cleveland, Denver, Miami and Pittsburgh had applied.

Once the applications were in, NCS Pearson raters—many of them former federal human resources specialists—reviewed them; 418,908 of the applicants qualified and were scheduled for full assessments. About 80 percent of them, or 328,051, completed the assessments.

Applicant testing was rigorous. Lengthy forms served as the basis for background investigations. Applicants spent four hours in various tests of their ability to distinguish objects and took an English language proficiency test. Physical ability tests lasted four to six hours and included vision and hearing exams as well as carrying boxes weighing between 10 pounds and 40 pounds repeatedly for 45 minutes to an hour. Then came drug tests and fingerprinting, along with interviews to assess customer service skills, honesty, integrity and dependability.

After all that, and if results of their initial background investigations were positive, applicants received job offers. In total, 129,120 applicants qualified to be screeners after the assessments. Of those, 61,292 were offered jobs and accepted. Another 66,219 were placed in what NCS Pearson called a “ready pool,” which TSA could tap to fill jobs that opened because of attrition.

The low rate of qualifying candidates—one out of every 13 applicants—helped fuel major cost increases. The NCS Pearson contract ended up at \$700 million, seven times the original estimate. About \$100 million of that went for human resources processing activities after screeners were hired; \$600 million went to the hiring effort. That’s about \$10,000 per hire, a figure that shocks some vendors who competed for the TSA project. TSA’s Rossides says that the cost-per-hire is high, but that strict deadlines forced a short schedule that drove up costs. For example, with more time, NCS Pearson could have rented hotel space during nonpeak seasons. The large number of applicants needing assessment also drove up costs. Rossides is now aiming for an \$8,000 to \$8,500 cost-per-hire.

Personnel information about newly hired screeners went to the FAA’s logistics center in Oklahoma City, which handles most Transportation Department payroll operations. NCS Pearson and the logistics center struggled before getting their computer systems to communicate. Some data was incomplete or wrong. In addition, time and attendance records weren’t automated, so the logistics center hired temporary workers to re-type screeners’ attendance data into the payroll system. Inefficiency, coupled with incomplete and incorrect data, resulted in late or incorrect payments for about 2 percent of screeners. The overwhelming task of data re-entry was further exacerbated by the slow start in hiring, which pushed hiring of a majority of screeners into mid- to late summer. The logistics center received paperwork for an average of 8,000 new screeners per pay period in August and September. In just those two months, the center had to enter data about 30,000 new screeners into the system.

TSA screeners made their first appearance at Baltimore/Washington International airport. Problems with their personnel data sent logistics center payroll chief Jim Thompson flying back and forth between Oklahoma City and Baltimore, shuttling time and attendance sheets to the logistics center and pay stubs back to Baltimore for verification. Thompson and his employees, along with NCS Pearson, worked out many of the problems as the hiring effort matured into November and December.

While handing off personnel folders to the logistics center, NCS Pearson handed the screeners themselves over to

Lockheed Martin for training and deployment. Rossides credits NCS Pearson, and the National Skills Standards Board, for picking the right candidates; only 2 percent of the 61,000 people who were given job offers failed to pass the subsequent training regimen.

TRAINED AND DEPLOYED

Rossides, who in mid-2002 directed the training and deployment efforts, met with Lockheed Martin training director Elmer Nelson in April, the day after TSA awarded the company the training contract. Nelson promised two things. First, that he and his team were committed to meeting TSA's goal and that the full capabilities of the \$18 billion-a-year company were behind them. Second, that succeeding with this contract was personally important to Lockheed Martin's workforce because the company lost an employee in the Sept. 11 attacks.

Nelson's team turned the training materials that TSA and FAA staff had developed into 400 training kits for use across the country. NCS Pearson typically would finish up with assessments and make job offers on a Friday. Lockheed would start training the screeners on Tuesday.

The law required 40 hours of classroom training, but Lockheed provided 44. The company created a temporary faculty of 1,000 Lockheed employees, academics and former federal employees. Lockheed also deployed 12,000 computers, sometimes moving equipment and trainers to airports and setting up classrooms with only a weekend's notice.

Lockheed, in fact, had two contracts, one for the classroom training role and the other for the deployment of screeners to the security lines in the airports. After the weeklong classroom instruction, Lockheed's training group sent screeners to the deployment group, which got them uniformed and ready for 65 hours of on-the-job training, conducted by the mobile trainers.

Retired Army Col. Verle Hammond stood at the center of the TSA deployment effort, and it reminded him of a military operation. "It was somewhat similar to being in combat, where your requirements were thrown at you rapidly and you had to be able to react and respond quickly," Hammond says. His McLean, Va.-based company, Innolog, was Lockheed Martin's logistics coordinator for the deployment effort.

The companies' work started Thursday or Friday each week when TSA named the next airport to be federalized. Over the weekend, Lockheed and Innolog would send teams to the

airports in advance of the mobile trainers and screeners-in-training. The advance teams put together city guides, airport maps and other information, arranged flights, booked rooms and arranged for food and transport for the mobile trainers.

Lockheed and Innolog set up centers to issue uniforms and badges at the airports. Vanity Fair Solutions, a uniform company in Nashville, made custom uniforms to fit each screener. Lockheed and Innolog also scheduled and tracked screeners' on-the-job training and kept track of the mobile trainers as they moved around the country.

Challenges and problems surfaced constantly. Schedules changed. Deployment teams were re-routed immediately upon arrival. One typical Saturday afternoon, Innolog got word that it needed to fly 100 people from various locations to 20 different airports that night.

Despite the constant hiccups, on Nov. 19, thousands of TSA employees, mobile trainers, contractors and subcontractors came up for air to discover that they had successfully deployed trained passenger screeners to all 429 major U.S. airports. A month later, they finished deploying thousands of baggage screeners as well. "People just dropped what they were doing and went to live in airports for six months," says Tim Bradley, who directed deployment for Lockheed Martin.

VERDICT STILL OUT

Surveys suggest that American air travelers feel safer today than they did in the wake of Sept. 11, and anecdotes pouring into TSA indicate that fliers are satisfied with security levels and customer service. Turnover, which averaged 105 percent annually among contract screeners, has been 10 percent so far. Rossides expects the annual rate to be 25 percent—an 80 percent improvement. A sign that the new workforce is better than the old is that only 15 percent of contract screeners passed TSA's rigorous testing and assessment process, she says.

But there are rumblings of discontent. The \$1 billion hiring effort cost more than most people expected. Transportation IG Mead reported in February that TSA's contract with NCS Pearson contained no safeguards to prevent cost increases. He found the agency "provided limited oversight for the management of the contract expenses." In one case, TSA officials said \$9 million of the \$18 million paid to an NCS Pearson subcontractor appeared to be a result of "wasteful and abusive spending practices." TSA officials blamed the problem on "the complete breakdown of management controls at NCS."

In fact, TSA is trying to get back money from NCS because the personnel files the company created for new hires don't comply with government requirements. The Defense Contract Audit Agency is reviewing the NCS Pearson contract for waste and abuse.

Another concern is anecdotal evidence that many applicants were unhappy with the hiring process. That seems natural given the number of people rejected, but some say they were rejected at some facilities but not at others. Such inconsistency could be challenged in court. Indeed, observers worry that TSA will spend years in court dealing with unhappy applicants, including disabled, minority and veteran candidates. For instance, in February, TSA officials still could not say how many veterans had been hired.

Even candidates who were hired complain about poor service from NCS Pearson. In January, NCS Pearson lost a re-competition of the TSA hiring contract to CPS, a California government agency that does human resources work for other governments.

No one at TSA claims the hiring marathon was error-free. "My goodness, we made mistakes," TSA's Rossides says. "But we learned from them and we continue to learn from them." She says the agency has developed a culture of continuous improvement, in which mistakes are confronted rather than swept under the rug.



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