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Dr. Akbar Ali
Assistant Professor,
Department of Public
Administration, School of
Humanities and Social Science,
Vardhman Mahaveer Open
University, Kota, Rajasthan,
India

Dr. Faize Ali Shah
Dean R&D and HOD,
Department of Management,
Eshan College of Management,
Mathura, Uttar Pradesh, India

An assessment of the position classification in public personnel administration

Akbar Ali and Faize Ali Shah

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Abstract

This article examines the concept, process, and significance of position classification as the foundation of modern personnel administration. Position classification provides an objective framework for organizing jobs based on duties, responsibilities, and qualification requirements, thereby ensuring fairness, transparency, and uniformity in public employment. The article discusses the structure of classification systems—including positions, classes, grades, and occupational groups—and highlights the characteristics of an effective classification plan. It further outlines the procedural steps involved in developing and implementing a classification system, along with the practical challenges and pressures that administrators frequently encounter. The article also evaluates the advantages and limitations of position classification, emphasizing its critical role in recruitment, pay equity, promotion, budgeting, and organizational efficiency. A comparative analysis between position classification (as practiced in the U.S.) and rank classification (as followed in India and the U.K.) underscores the conceptual and operational differences between job-based and rank-based personnel frameworks. Ultimately, the article argues that position classification remains central to ensuring equitable treatment, standardized remuneration, and effective personnel management in large-scale public organizations.

Keywords: Position classification, rank classification, personnel administration, public service management, job evaluation, classification plan, grades and classes, equal pay for equal work, recruitment, promotion systems, administrative efficiency, civil service

Introduction

Classification serves as the backbone of personnel management. It establishes a framework that defines what each position entails, what qualifications are needed, and how different roles relate to each other within the organizational structure. Think of it as creating a roadmap that guides both employees and managers in understanding career paths, compensation structures, and reporting relationships. The beauty of position classification lies in its objectivity. It doesn't matter if the current employee is a 25-year veteran or a fresh graduate – the position's classification remains the same based on job content. This ensures that equal work receives equal pay, a fundamental principle of fair employment practices.

Real-world application: Consider the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) at the district level. Whether it's a District Collector in two different States, the position classification remains the same because the core duties and responsibilities are similar, even though the individuals may have different backgrounds or experience levels.

This system promotes fairness and transparency. Employees know exactly what their job entails and what they need to do to advance. It also makes recruitment easier because job descriptions are clear and standardized. Additionally, it helps in budgeting and planning as organizations can predict salary costs based on position classifications.

A systematic classification and standardization of all positions is the basis upon which the entire personnel system rests. Without it says Willoughby, "it is impossible to have a satisfactory personnel system, or properly to meet the many problems to which personnel administration give rise.". Another celebrated authority observes, "Present day personnel management rests on two major foundations, tests of fitness and position classification.

In any country today the government is the single biggest employer. It employs hundreds of thousands of persons.

Corresponding Author:

Dr. Akbar Ali
Assistant Professor,
Department of Public
Administration, School of
Humanities and Social Science,
Vardhman Mahaveer Open
University, Kota, Rajasthan,
India

Almost every vocation, occupation or profession finds a place in the government pay roll. If the government attempted to deal with each employee individually, it is bound to lead to immense difficulties. Hence, large scale organisations resort to classification.

Classification

Classification means organising positions into groups or classes on the basis of duties and responsibilities. It is quite possible to group a position on any other basis too, say for example pay scale, agency where it is located, level of education and training required etc. As a matter of fact, prior to 1923 in U.S.A. salary scale was used as the basis of classification. However, by experience it has been established that for efficient performance of most personnel operations grouping of positions on the basis of their duties and responsibilities is by far the most suitable.

In a classification plan the lowest unit is a 'position'. The American Classification Act of 1949 defines position as the work consisting of duties and responsibilities assignable to an officer or employee. A position has to be differentiated from the incumbent of the position. It at any particular period of time may be vacant or occupied. If occupied, the occupant may be permanent, a probationer, or temporarily holding a position.

A number of similar or identical positions put together constitute a class. A class is a group of positions having similar duties and responsibilities and level of difficulty. In matters of personnel administration all positions included in a class are treated alike. These have identical qualification requirements and are covered by identical salary schedules. A class may have a single position or it might have hundreds and thousands of positions. However, in a class dissimilar positions are not to be included in as much as all positions in a class are accorded like treatment in matters of personnel administration.

For each class of positions, a class specification is prepared outlining the following

- i) Title of the class.
- ii) Statement of duties and responsibilities.
- iii) Examples of work performed.
- iv) Statement of minimum qualifications.
- v) Scale of pay.
- vi) Lines of promotion.

The classes are further grouped together into broad occupational groups, called services. There may be services of each professional or technical specialisation say management, finance, purchase, accounts, engineering etc. Furthermore, classification can also be based on comparable level of difficulty and responsibility of work across the whole public service. It is done regardless of work done. Such groupings are known as grades. For all positions within the grade the same pay scale applies. In U.S.A. the Federal Classification Act 1949 defines grade as "including all classes of positions which although different with respect to kind or subject matter of work are sufficiently similar as to their level of difficulty or responsibility and qualification requirements as to justify their inclusion within one range of compensation".

A classification plan is thus an attempt at systematic analysis and arrangement of positions on the basis of duties to be performed and difficulty or responsibility involved.

The basic features are usually determined by an act of the legislatures. Details are left to be worked out by the executive branch within the legislative frame work. Thus it is a division of responsibility between the legislative and executive branches. Under the American Classification Act of 1949, the Congress provides the ground rules. The basic delegation is to the Civil Service Commission which makes these rules more precise. The administrative agencies operate the system in accordance with the rules. The Commission assists as well as polices the action.

Characteristics of a good classification plan

The following are some of the characteristics of a good classification plan:

- 1) There should not be too many classes, or occupational groups. Efforts should be made to limit the number of classes.
- 2) Classification should be objective. Very often it is pointed out that classification in government is rather subjective. Political pressure lack of personal interest etc. stand in the way of making it business like.
- 3) Classification should be based on what an employee is actually required to do. Often during the classification process capabilities, qualifications and efficiency of the incumbent are taken into account. This is wrong. A distinction must be maintained between the position and the incumbent thereof.
- 4) The classification plan should be kept up-to-date. Circumstances, duties and responsibilities might change necessitating a change in classification. To keep the plan up-to-date is a continuing affair. Constant effort is needed to keep even the best plan serviceable.
- 5) It should be acceptable to the management as well as the workers. While preparing the classification plan the representatives of the unions should be taken into confidence.
- 6) It must be understood by all concerned and enjoy a reputation of being fair.
- 7) Only such positions should be included in a class which are sufficiently alike to be given identical treatment in matters of personnel administration.
- 8) The classification plan should include a written description of duties and responsibilities of each position and class.
- 9) A written statement of minimum qualification i.e. education, experience and knowledge required of the incumbent should also be there.
- 10) Lines of promotion and pay schedules should also be incorporated in the classification plan.

Preparing a classification Plan

In order to prepare a classification plan four basic steps are necessary.

- i) The first step is to analyse and record the duties and other distinctive characteristics of the positions to be classified. This needs adequate information regarding duties, responsibilities, knowledge and experience.
- ii) After the first step has been undergone, the positions need to be classified on the basis of like characteristics. Care has to be taken that only such positions are grouped together as are sufficiently alike to be treated together in the matters of personnel administration processes.
- iii) After the positions have been arranged into classes, the

classes are further grouped into occupational categories or services. At this stage also the guiding principle is that classes with like characteristics should be put together.

iv) At the third stage such standards and specifications are tested for each class of positions as will indicate its character.

v) Now the preparatory stages are over. The classification Plan has been set up. At the Fourth stage it is installed. It is at this stage that individual positions are allocated to classes. The plan has to be adopted and the agency to administer it determined. In the federal Government of U. S. A. the classification plans are to be administered by the heads of the various agencies subject to overall supervision and control of the civil service commission. In classification plan invariably there is a provision for preferring appeals should an employee feel aggrieved.

Problems in the way of implementing a classification plan

To administer a classification plan is a tough job. The administrative agencies responsible for classification face many a difficulty in the way. A few are indicated below: -

- i) The status and scale of pay of an employee are dependent on the classification of his position. As such he makes all possible efforts to get it upgraded.
- ii) There is organised pressure mounted for classifying sub-professional groups into professional groups. The pressure is rather intense in ease of border line positions.
- iii) Since the classification is to be reviewed from time to time the interested parties are constantly busy canvassing support. There seems to be a constant state of tug of war between the employees or group of employees on one hand and the tax payers and their representatives on the other.
- iv) Very often the governmental agencies themselves support or suggest an unwarranted upgrading of positions. This is done because somebody has to be brought into government service. He is in receipt of a higher salary, and the position in the current classification does not carry that much salary.
- v) The organised pressure to upgrade the positions becomes rather intense during the periods of inflation.
- vi) If the importance and responsibility of a position increase pressure is mounted to upgrade it. However, should these go down, it is very often not reported. This leads to wasteful expenditure.
- vii) A lot of time and attention on part of individuals and the government agencies is wasted in the process of classification. Individuals are busy promoting their own cause; upgrading, retaining the present classification, or preferring an appeal against an adverse decision. Agencies have got to defend their own action in the event of appeal being preferred, or during the course of classification audit.

Benefits of classification

It is no exaggeration to state that a sound system of classification is a necessary precondition for satisfactory handing of the major problems of personnel administration. The following are some of the benefits of classification: -

- 1) It facilitates recruitment. Operating agencies are able to determine their personnel requirements definitely.

Recruiting agencies can frame tests better because they have adequate information regarding job content.

- 2) It makes possible the enforcement of the principle of equal pay for equal work.
- 3) Under a classification plan only salary can be fixed in accordance with responsibilities and duties.
- 4) Classification facilitates establishment of promotion system based on merit. Such a system is fair to both the government as well as the employees.
- 5) Classification provides basis for creation of distinct services. Such services increase the possibilities of permanent career for the employees.
- 6) Classification makes budgetary control feasible. Legislatures can have better control over expenditures for personnel services. In the absence of classification, a bewildering array of titles is used for pay roll purposes.
- 7) It provides a standard to measure the efficiency or otherwise of an employee. His performance can be measured in terms of job content.
- 8) It facilitates organisational training programmes. These can be tailored to the requirements of job content.
- 9) It provides a basis for understanding as to job and pay. A man knows at the outset what he is expected to do and what the management in return will pay. Such knowledge is likely to facilitate better employee-management relationship.
- 10) Since classification requires definition and description of duties, responsibilities of each position are made specific. It provides the basis for good supervision. It is easy to pin down responsibility for acts of commission and omission.
- 11) Classification introduces uniform job terminology. Varieties of titles are eliminated. Because of use of Uniform terminology job content of a position or a class can be better understood throughout the government Service.
- 12) Classification tends to eliminate the evil of specific salary legislation for an individual employee or a group of employees.
- 13) Classification is helpful in avoiding duplication, inconsistency etc. in work process.
- 14) It ensures the tax payer that there is a logical relationship between expenses incurred for personnel service and services rendered.
- 15) Classification offers to the services against personal or political discrimination. Within the same class all have to be paid alike.

Disadvantages of classification

The following are some of the important criticisms against position classification plans.

- 1) The classification plans are much too detailed and they make the personnel system rigid. There is an element of truth in the above allegation. The position classification is definitely more elaborate as compared to rank classification system. It has a much larger number of categories. Much labour is gone into the preparation of class and position specifications. In order to make it free from ambiguity and precise, it has to be drafted in an elaborate manner. At times it runs into several pages of printed matter. All this has a tendency to make the personnel system rigid.
- 2) It handicaps reassignment of personnel within the same

general field from one sort of work to another.

- 3) The position classification system discourages establishment of corps adaptable to varied and enriching work assignments.
- 4) It requires a lot of effort to keep the classification scheme up to date. It has a tendency to get out of date rather quickly.
- 5) Employees suffer from a sense of insecurity. There is a constant fear their position might be downgraded resulting in loss of status and salary.
- 6) A good deal of pressure is mounted on the agencies concerned to up-grade the positions.

In position classification a man's rank is basically a function of the job he performs. Since the job content of a position keeps on changing, the status and salary of the incumbent also changes, should the job be placed in a higher or lower category. In U. S A. a position may be transferred from General Schedule 9 to General Schedule 8 or 10. If transferred to General Schedule 8 the status and salary of the incumbent are adversely affected. Hence there is the need of a system of classification audit and elaborate procedure regarding appeals in matters of classification orders. On the other hand in rank classification an officer is placed in a particular category. For example an officer in India may be placed in an all India, Central or state service. Within these services he may be placed in the gazetted or non-gazetted category. In rank classification a man's status and salary are determined with reference to the service to which he belongs. It does not depend on posting or job performed. A member of the Indian Administrative service may be posted in any capacity. He will retain his status and salary as an I. A. S. officer. As a member of the I. A. S. cadre he earns his salary, increment and other service benefits.

Development of Position Classification

The following are some of the important factors responsible for the development of position classification:

- i) Adoption of merit system demanded some sort of classification. If the posts were really to be filled on the basis of merit it was obligatory to find out what they were supposed to do and what qualifications were required.
- ii) The classification was also related to broader aims of efficiency and economy in administration. Absence of classification meant lack of standard job titles or descriptions. The same or similar jobs might have ten or twenty different titles and pay rates.
- iii) Centralised financial control demanded a system of classification. It provided means for effective financial control. Before classification was introduced "hundreds of jobs had their pay set individually in appropriation acts, and annually and biannually the appropriating bodies would be besieged by individual claims for increases. There was overpayment and underpayment and much discontent in the public services.
- iv) It was in the interest of all the employees as well as the government that some classification be adopted. It ensures equitable treatment and fair evaluation. It brings about orderly arrangements.
- v) The demand of equal pay for equal work also made classification a necessary prerequisite. Classification introduced standard pay scales related to work performed.

- vi) Classification was being adopted extensively in private industry. If it was good for private personnel administration, it should have desirable effects for public personnel administration too. However, the objectives of classification in private and public administration were not alike. In private administration it was intended primarily to increase efficiency and production. Standardization and equalisation of pay were secondary objectives. In the governmental administration it was just the reverse. Here the primary objective was standardization and equalization of pay. Facilitating the process of personnel administration was only secondary.

The more sophisticated of the two types is the 'position' classification system. This is prevalent in the USA. Position connotes a group of current duties and responsibilities assigned by a competent authority requiring the full time or part time employment of one person. It has been defined as the work consisting of the duties and responsibilities assigned by competent authority for performance by an employee or an officer. In position classification, a person's rank, salary etc., depends on the functions of the position—the duties and responsibilities attached to the job he/she performs. Here the duties and responsibilities which are attached to the job are more important than the person discharging those duties. In the view of Milton M Mandell "By classification is meant the grouping of positions on the basis of similarity of duties and qualifications requirements". The International Civil Service Advisory Board of the United Nations also endorsed this view and states "It is the consensus of the organisations that the general level of duties and responsibilities constitutes the only realistic basis for achieving a comparable classification of posts". In position classification, positions that are comparable are brought together into a common group called 'class'.

The 'class' or 'class of positions' is made up of positions which are sufficiently similar in (a) kind of subject matter of work, (b) level of difficulty and responsibility, (c) qualification requirements of the work, so as to enable similar treatment in personnel and pay administration. So that is how a class is formed in position classification system. Now there is one more term known as 'grade' and let us understand what it is. A grade is used to denote all classes of positions which (although different with respect to kind or subject matter of work) are sufficiently similar as to (a) the level of difficulty and responsibility and (b) the level of qualification for the job. (For example, civil engineer, accountant, geologist etc.) Hence in a grade, all classes are brought together irrespective of the occupation, but those which are of comparable levels of responsibility. Under the position classification system, each position should be placed in its appropriate class. Each class should be placed in its appropriate grade. Thus, we bring together positions which are alike or very closely related into a class. positions which are in one class are. closely comparable in duties, responsibilities and needed qualifications, and can be dealt with as a unit for personnel, budgetary and organisational process. We bring together into class-series all the classes which are in the same occupational group. Classes in a series form a logical occupational pattern and define the hierarchy of responsibility for that occupational group. We have one more logical grouping, that of grade. We bring together into a grade all classes, regardless of

occupation, which are of comparable responsibility. Hence grades form logical groups for the setting of pay scales.

Position Classification V/S Rank Classification

Lastly, as against position classification in U.S.A, we have the system of rank classification in India and U.K. The two classification systems have been developed along two different lines. The difference between the two can be seen from the chart given below: -

Position Classification

- 1) This is an elaborate and detailed scheme.
- 2) Has larger number of classes. In U.S.A. the general schedule has eighteen classes.
- 3) Job determines the position of the man.
- 4) Has elaborate procedure of classification audit.
- 5) Appeals against classification order may be preferred by the department or the incumbent.
- 6) There is a tendency to get out of date rather quickly.
- 7) Salary and status depend on position.

Rank Classification

- 1) This is a general scheme. It is less elaborate and non-detailed.
- 2) Has smaller number of classes. In U.K. the generalist service has only five classes.
- 3) Man has a rank independent of the job. Several of the administrative class retains his position irrespective of his placement.
- 4) There is nothing like classification audit in the rank classification system.
- 5) There is no system of appeals in the rank classification.
- 6) Since it contains broad categories, it can serve for a longer period.
- 7) Salary and status are independent of posting.

Conclusion

Position classification thus tries to classify public service on the basis of a uniform job. In position classification, the main objective is to lay the foundation for equitable treatment for the public service employees by the accurate definition, orderly arrangement, and fair evaluation of positions of each employee in the public service. Whereas rank classification is based on job-performance in respect of a cluster of functional positions by a group of people, with diverse qualifications/experience/aptitude but of same or similar rank, as in Army or India's cadre-based services.

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