



DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
Veterans Benefits Administration
Washington, D.C. 20420

July 30, 2012

Director (00/21C)
All VA Regional Offices and Centers

In Reply Refer to: 21
Fast Letter 12-19

SUBJ: Implementation of Article 67, Skills Certification, in the Master Agreement
between the Department of Veterans Affairs and the American Federation of
Government Employees (AFGE)

Purpose

This letter states the requirements for implementing the recent agreement between VA and AFGE concerning Skills Certification of VBA claims processors. See:
http://www.va.gov/LMR/docs/DVA_AFGE_Art_68_Skills_Certification.pdf

Background

Since August 2003, the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) has developed and validated Skills Certification tests for positions in the Veterans Service Center and Pension Management Center. Skills Certification tests are currently in place for Veterans Service Representatives (VSRs), Pension Management Center VSRs, Rating VSRs (RVSRs), Decision Review Officers (DROs) and Supervisory VSRs (SVSRs). Public Law 110-389, Section 225, requires that the Secretary of Veterans Affairs provide an examination for appropriate employees and managers who are responsible for processing claims for compensation and pension benefits and requires these individuals to take a Skills Certification examination. Mid-term bargaining negotiations between VA and AFGE concerning the implementation of this public law and the impact on bargaining unit employees resulted in a January 9, 2012 agreement on Skills Certification included as Article 67 in the Master Agreement. The duties of management and rights of employees contained in this article were effective February 9, 2012.

Article 67 states three purposes for Skills Certification: to comply with 38 USC 7732A; to provide a mechanism for measuring employees' attainment of the skills, knowledge, and abilities needed to be successful in their positions; and to identify training needs.

Changes to All Tests

All journey-level employees for whom a Skills Certification test is applicable are now required to take the Skills Certification test for their position. They must take the test within one year of their eligibility to do so, and they will be required to re-take the test each time it is offered until they pass the test. Employees who pass the test applicable to their positions will be required to retake the test every two years as long as they stay in that journey-level position. (See Article 67, Section 1-c: “Employees will be required to sit for periodic recertification as long as they remain in the position.”) Employees are no longer required to meet local performance standards as a prerequisite to taking the Skills Certification tests. In addition, per Article 67, VA will no longer offer Skills Certification tests to trainee or non-journey level VSRs and RVSRs.

Employees who previously served as Subject Matter Experts for the purpose of creating and updating the Skills Certification tests are required to take the test.

Changes to Rating VSR Test

Prior to the agreement contained in Article 67, GS-11 RVSRs were required to pass the RVSR Skills Certification test. Effective February 12, 2012, non-journey level RVSRs will be promoted to journey-level status without needing to pass the Skills Certification test, provided the criteria in Article 23 of the Master Agreement, Merit Promotion, are met. Basically, this criteria provides that the employee must be rated as successful and must meet the promotion criteria in his or her career ladder plan. (See: Article 23, Section 4 – Career Ladder Advancement)

http://www.va.gov/LMR/docs/Master_Agreement_between_DVA_and_AFGE-fin_52311.pdf

However, taking the Skills Certification test is still required under Article 67 for the purposes described therein, e.g., complying with Public Law 110-389, ascertaining an employee’s current ability to perform the job, and to tailor training to an employee’s needs as indicated by the results of the Skills Certification test.

Changes to VSR Test

Per Article 67, VA will no longer offer the Skills Certification test for non-journey level VSRs. Future hiring for the VSR position will show the GS-10 level as the top of the career ladder (full performance). The VSR Skills Certification test results will no longer be used to promote a VSR from a GS-10 to a GS-11 for employees hired under these job announcements. The VSR Skills Certification test will be revised to provide for a

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measure of the skills, knowledge, and abilities needed to be successful as a GS-10 journey level VSR.

VSRs hired under the full performance GS-10 job announcement can compete for the GS-11 position under a merit promotion announcement. Skills Certification tests for GS-11 and GS-12 VSRs are under development.

VSRs hired under the full performance GS-11 level and meeting the requirements for promotion under Article 23 will be given three consecutive attempts to pass the test. The three consecutive attempts will begin within one year of achieving the GS-10 grade or August 2012, whichever date is later. VSRs will be promoted to the GS-11 grade upon passing the VSR Skills Certification test during one of these three attempts.

Per Article 67, Section 1d, VSRs currently in career ladder GS-11 positions, who are unable to pass the Skills Certification test after three consecutive attempts will be placed in a full performance GS-10 VSR position. (See attached Questions & Answers for additional information.)

Test Results

Employees will receive sufficient training to participate in the certification program. “Sufficient training” consists of National Training Plan requirements as well as any additional training specified by the Compensation Service or Pension Service.

Employees and the President (or his/her designee) of the National VA Council (NVAC) will be promptly notified when VA receives Skills Certification test results. Along with the test results, employees will receive written feedback provided by Compensation Service or Pension and Fiduciary Service concerning test performance, and they will have the opportunity to discuss the results with their supervisor or another knowledgeable employee, such as an authorizer or senior employee.

Based on the test results and the feedback, the employee and supervisor will develop an individualized training plan, which may include repeating any necessary classes. Feedback will identify knowledge areas in which improvement is needed.

Training associated with Skills Certification will be counted towards the employee’s annual training requirement for “Station Determined Technical Training”.

Additional Questions

Direct questions concerning the Pension Management Center VSR test to Pension and Fiduciary Service at: VAVBAWAS/CO/Pension & Training.

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Direct questions concerning all other tests to Compensation Service at:
[VAVBAWAS/CO/C&PTraining](#).

/s/

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Enclosure