

Competing for Federal Jobs

Job Search Experiences of New Hires

A Report to the President and the Congress of the
United States by the U.S. Merit Systems Protection



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Contents

Executive Summary	iv
Introduction	1
The competitive examining process	1
Purpose of this study	2
Scope and methodology	2
New Employees Hired Through the Competitive Process	3
The kinds of positions the new hires took	3
Agencies that did most of the competitive hiring	4
Some general demographics of new employees hired competitively	4
Job Search Experiences of New Hires	7
Relatives and friends were the most common source of job information	7
The majority of new hires had Internet access	8
Applying for jobs was generally easy	9
Hiring decisions were made fairly quickly but other phases of the hiring process took longer	10
New hires experienced some common difficulties	13
Feedback was late or nonexistent	13
Too much information was needed to apply	14
The quality of service was below applicants' expectations	14
The impact of the examining office is critical	15
Workload	15
Level of expertise	16
Conclusions and Recommendations	17
Appendix A. Occupations/positions for which written and/or performance tests are required	19
Appendix B. Special hiring authorities for which competitive examining is not required	23

Executive Summary

The U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB or Board) has the statutory responsibility of reporting on whether the civil service is free of prohibited personnel practices and complies with the merit systems principles. In August 1999, MSPB published a report on how agencies carry out their delegated examining authority which previously had been primarily the responsibility of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM). Delegated examining is a process by which agencies rate and rank external candidates for competitive service positions. In most agencies, the process is carried out by their Delegated Examining Units (DEU's). As a follow-on to that earlier report, this report focuses on the job search experiences of a sample of new Federal employees who have gone through the competitive examining process administered by DEU's.

To prepare this report, we used data gathered from OPM's Central Personnel Data File (CPDF), which contains personnel information on some 1.8 million Federal civilian employees. We also surveyed nearly 2,000 randomly selected new employees who were hired competitively through DEU's during the 18-month study period June 1996-December 1997.

Responses to our survey were fairly positive, which suggests that DEU's are doing a good job of conducting most aspects of the competitive examining process. But the survey results also indicate that there is great room for improvement in customer service. Although ultimately successful in obtaining Federal jobs, many respondents cited difficulties they encountered during their job search. This report does not address the views of applicants who were unsuccessful in finding Federal jobs. Their views are almost certainly different from those of candidates who were hired, and may be more negative. Even so, our findings offer a glimpse at what job applicants might experience as they look for Federal jobs. And, where appropriate, we offer suggestions to improve the hiring process.

From fiscal year 1994 through fiscal year 1998, the Government hired a total of about 226,000 new full-time, permanent employees in more than 450 white-collar occupational series. In FY 1997, about half (51 percent) of all new employees were hired through the competitive examining process. These are the subject of our report. The remaining 49 percent did not go through the competitive examining process but instead were hired through one of many special appointing authorities, some of which we discuss in appendix B. New employees hired through these special appointing authorities and Federal employees who change jobs via the internal merit promotion process are not covered in this report.

The Departments of the Treasury and Justice were the major employers of the FY 1997 new hires. These two departments hired almost half of all the

new employees hired competitively in FY 1997. Most of the new hires were appointed to clerical positions.

Job search experiences of new hires

- *Relatives and friends were the new hires' most common sources of job information.* Thirty-three percent of new hires first learned about their current Federal jobs through their friends and relatives. Not surprisingly, new hires who first learned about their jobs this way agreed that it was easy to apply for Federal job openings.
- *The majority of new hires had Internet access.* The majority of our survey respondents (56 percent) had access to the Internet but of those who had access, only half (53 percent) used it to search for Federal jobs. The number of new hires

using the Internet for their Federal job search might have been higher had all been aware that Federal jobs are posted on the Internet. As it is, 47 percent of all new hires indicated that they were not aware that Federal job vacancies could be found on the Internet. Only 7 percent of all respondents submitted their application over the Internet.

- *Applying for jobs was generally easy.* Sixty-two percent of our respondents agreed that it was easy to apply for the Federal jobs in which they were interested. Related questions shed some light on why this group of new hires would generally think applying for Federal jobs was easy. For example, in addition to getting help from their relatives and friends, a majority of the new hires found that vacancy announcements provided enough information to enable them to decide if they were qualified for the position (75 percent), and to decide if they were interested in applying (67 percent). Additionally, 64 percent of the new hires found vacancy announcements to be open long enough to give them reasonable time to apply.
- *Hiring decisions were made within a reasonable period of time but other phases of the hiring process took longer.* Fifty-eight percent of our respondents agreed that hiring decisions were made within a reasonable period of time. However, our respondents wrote that other phases in the hiring process took unreasonably long. They indicated that the time between submission of the application and being scheduled for an interview was longer than they thought reasonable, as was the time between being told they had the job and being able to report to work.
- *Many new hires encountered difficulties during their job search.* New hires cited various difficulties they encountered during their job search but the most common were not receiving timely feedback or receiving none at all, having to supply what they thought was too much information in order to apply, and not receiving the quality of service they expected from the examining staff.

Recommendations

Agencies should look for ways to expedite their hiring processes. Timeliness of the hiring process is a high priority issue for job applicants. Respondents to our survey warned that excessive and unexplained delays before interviews are scheduled or delays in bringing new employees on board could make some highly qualified candidates lose interest in the jobs. Agencies should make the length of time in which they fill their vacancies as short as reasonably possible for the type of job being filled. Agencies may want to collect feedback from their own new hires, through surveys or focus groups, to determine which phase(s) of the hiring process work well and which do not.

Agencies should ensure that their competitive examining staff and those responsible for recruiting think of applicants as customers and treat them in accord with agencies' customer service standards. In a time of fierce competition for good workers, agencies cannot afford to short circuit their recruitment and examining efforts. Because applicants want to know what becomes of their applications, agencies may want to establish an e-mail address to which applicants may address questions about application status. Agencies should ensure that adequate staff are available to answer those questions. Or, agencies may want to establish automated tracking systems to provide application status information. In short, agencies should provide some type of meaningful feedback to job applicants according to the agencies' customer service standards.

OPM and agencies should improve how vacancy announcements are posted on the Internet.

Vacancy announcements should be an effective recruiting tool that helps sell the Government as an employer of choice. Electronic announcements accessible via the Internet should be visually appealing, informative, and easy to navigate. Agencies should ensure that links to their vacancy listings are prominently displayed on the home page so visitors can easily find them. Information on benefits and on how the application process works, a glossary defining terms such as

“term appointment” and “ICTAP,”* and other information commonly used in Government recruiting should be made easily accessible at agency Web sites or through links to USAJobs, OPM’s centralized electronic job database. Such links could help ensure that common information

is available at a uniform level of quality and does not clutter vacancy announcements. In short, the Government’s Internet job sites should be geared towards applicants who are not well versed in the Federal hiring process.

* The term “ICTAP” means Interagency Career Transition Assistance Program. ICTAP is a program in which surplus or displaced employees are given special priority for jobs in agencies other than their own.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Today, the Federal Government faces the challenge of maintaining and improving the quality of its workforce in an environment in which there is stiff competition for superior candidates. To compete with the private sector for high-quality applicants, the Government “reinvented” its recruiting and hiring processes starting in the early 1990’s. Early in its reinvention efforts, the Government attempted to make the application process user-friendly by allowing applicants to apply for jobs using resumes or any other format they chose, instead of the Standard Form 171, the Application for Federal Employment.¹ And, to speed up the hiring of high-quality candidates, the Office of Personnel Management delegated to agencies the authority to examine the qualifications of external applicants—a task that previously had been primarily the responsibility of OPM—for virtually all occupations.

The merit principles are the guiding ideals for the Government’s human resources management activities. One of the merit principles requires agencies to select applicants solely on the basis of their relative knowledge, skills, and ability as determined through fair and open competition. To achieve fair and open competition, Federal agencies publicly advertise job vacancies. As a means of notifying the public of Federal job openings, agencies are required to post their vacancies in OPM’s centralized electronic job database, USAJobs, which applicants can access by computer or telephone.²

The Competitive Examining Process

Recently, the Merit Systems Protection Board published a report that explored the agencies’ experiences with delegated examining units.³ The DEU is the part of an agency’s human resources (HR) office that is responsible for examining the qualifications of job applicants from outside the Federal Government for jobs in the competitive service. To ensure that selections are made from among the best-qualified available candidates, DEU’s compare applicants’ qualifications to job-related criteria as measured by valid selection devices. Among the variety of devices that DEU’s can use to examine applicants’ qualifications, the most common are:

- **Written tests** (also sometimes called assembled examinations). Appendix A lists occupations that currently require a written test.
- **Unassembled examinations.** An unassembled examination is an assessment and rating of the applicants’ education and experience against job-related knowledge, skills, and abilities. Almost all Federal positions above the entry level as well as jobs with no written test requirements are filled through this method.

Applicants who pass a competitive examination (either assembled or unassembled) receive numerical ratings between 70 and 100. Applicants who are entitled to Veterans’ Preference have 5 or 10 points added to their earned passing scores. Candi-

1. The Government stopped printing the SF-171 in January 1995. Although the form is no longer distributed, existing copies or applications with the same format may still be used.

2. The Worldwide Web address of USAJobs is <http://www.usajobs.opm.gov/> and the telephone number is (912) 757-3000. USAJobs may also be accessed through the computer bulletin board at (912) 757-3100.

3. U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, “The Role of Delegated Examining Units: Hiring New Employees in a Decentralized Civil Service,” Washington, DC, August 1999.

dates are then referred to selecting officials in the order of their earned scores—highest scores first—except that compensable disabled veterans are placed above all other candidates. Veterans are always referred ahead of nonveterans with equal scores. In fiscal year 1997, 51 percent of new employees were hired through the competitive examining process.

Applicants can sometimes bypass competitive examinations and be hired for a Federal job in the competitive service by meeting special criteria. Agencies use numerous special appointing authorities, e.g., the Outstanding Scholar hiring authority or the Student Educational Employment Program, to hire new employees without conducting competitive examinations. New employees hired through these special appointing authorities (49 percent of new employees in FY 1997) were not part of this study but the most common special authorities are briefly described in appendix B.

Purpose of this Study

We conducted this study in accordance with the Board's mandate to report on whether the civil service is free of prohibited personnel practices and in accord with the merit system principles. This report serves as a follow-on to our report on DEU's by focusing on the job search experiences of new employees hired into the competitive service through the competitive examining process administered by DEU's. We address how and how well the competitive process worked for the new employees, and whether the various methods used for attracting quality employees have been effective. The report also looks at which agencies were hiring and for what types of occupations during fiscal years 1994-98 and provides demographic data on those hired.

Scope and Methodology

This report covers new Federal employees who were appointed into full-time permanent white-

collar occupations in the competitive service and who went through a competitive examining process during the 18-month study period June 1996-December 1997. The Board limited the scope of the report to new employees hired through the competitive examining process—51 percent of total in FY 1997—because they were a significant portion of new hires who had common job search experiences.

To prepare this report, we relied primarily on the following sources of information:

- OPM's Central Personnel Data File. The CPDF, a computerized database maintained by OPM, contains personnel information on some 1.8 million Federal civilian employees.⁴

- Survey of new hires.⁵ We surveyed 1,867 randomly selected new hires who were brought on board during the 18 months before our survey (most were hired during FY 1997). A total of 750 recipients returned their questionnaires, for a response rate of 40 percent. The survey was conducted during January through April 1999.

As we discuss in more detail in the next section of this report, the occupational distribution of new hires reflects the Government's priorities at any given time. Our survey data represent the experiences only of employees newly hired during our 18-month study period. It is possible that individuals hired in other years would have had different experiences.

- Online job search. To better understand the comments written by our survey respondents, we used the Internet to search for a variety of clerical, professional, and administrative jobs that were open to outside applicants. We also searched for law enforcement and managerial jobs. This sampling of typical online job announcements gave us greater understanding of what our respondents might have found during their job search.

4. Employees from the U.S. Postal Service, the intelligence agencies, and other agencies exempt from personnel reporting requirements are not included in the database.

5. We use the terms "new hire" and "new employees" interchangeably in this report to denote new employees who were hired through the competitive examining process.

CHAPTER 2

New Employees Hired Through the Competitive Process

The Government has been reducing its workforce since the early 1990's. At the same time, it has been hiring new employees to staff new programs or to replace some employees who left. CPDF data show that during fiscal years 1994-98, the Government hired a total of about 226,000 new employees (see table 1) into more than 450 white-collar occupational series on a full-time permanent basis. The table also shows that the number of new employees hired through the competitive examining process has been increasing relative to all new hires, reaching 54 percent in FY 1998 (the remaining 46 percent were hired without the use of the competitive examining process). This trend will probably continue if some of the special hiring authorities (discussed in appendix B) agencies currently use are phased out or allowed to lapse.⁶

The Kinds of Positions the New Hires Took

Most of the positions the FY 1997 new hires took were concentrated in a few occupational series, many of them clerical (see table 2). Specifically, most new hires were appointed as data transcribers, tax examiners, miscellaneous clerks, mail and file clerks, and secretaries. In addition to being hired into these clerical positions, many new hires were appointed to law enforcement positions as border

Table 1. All new employees including those hired through the competitive examining process (full-time permanent white-collar employees only), FY 1994-1998

Item	FY 94	FY 95	FY 96	FY 97	FY 98
All new hires	35,240	43,637	43,260	48,602	55,833
New employees hired through the competitive examining process	11,475	18,879	20,675	25,008	30,023
Percent of new employees hired through the competitive process	33	43	48	51	54

Table 2. Top 10 occupations of new employees hired through the competitive examining process into full-time permanent white-collar positions and agencies that hired them the most, FY

Occupation Title and Series	All New Hires	Agency That Hired the Most	Number Hired by Agency That Hired the Most
Data Transcriber, GS-0356	4,428	Treasury	4,343
Tax Examining, GS-0592	2,117	Treasury	2,117
Border Patrol, GS-1896	1,613	Justice	1,613
Correctional Officer, GS-0007	1,203	Justice	1,203
Contact Representatives, GS-0962	967	Treasury	703
Misc. Clerk & Assistant, GS-0303	956	Treasury	468
Mail & File Clerk, GS-0305	642	Treasury	589
Secretarial, GS-0318	486	Justice	147
General Business, GS-1101	478	Agriculture	367
Computer Specialist, GS-0334	405	Navy	46

patrol agents and correctional officers. Together, these seven occupations accounted for 46 percent of all new hires hired competitively in FY 1997.

6. For instance, the authority to noncompetitively appoint post-Vietnam era veterans under the Veterans' Readjustment Appointment authority expired on December 31, 1999, for those post-Vietnam era veterans who were last released from active duty more than 10 years ago, and the Luevano Consent Decree, which approved the Outstanding Scholar and the Bilingual/ Bicultural hiring authorities, could be terminated by the Court at any time, thus ending those hiring authorities.

Agencies that Did Most of the Competitive Hiring

The Departments of the Treasury and Justice were the two major Government employers of new hires, hiring about half of all those newly hired in the 4-year period FY 1995-FY 1998 (see table 3). However, the new hires were concentrated in a few subordinate agencies of Treasury and Justice rather than spread evenly across the departments.

Specifically, at the Treasury Department, the main employer was the Internal Revenue Service (IRS).

carrying out the programs will concentrate their hiring efforts to support them. Thus, the experiences of new hires described later in this report may disproportionately reflect the experiences of individuals hired for occupations that supported the Government's program priorities during the period of our study.

Some General Demographics of New Employees Hired Competitively

- In general, new employees hired in FY 1994 and FY 1995 had slightly higher educational levels than

those hired in later years. In both earlier years, half of the new hires had college degrees while in later years only about 40 percent did (see table 4). The educational level of new employees hired for administrative occupations went down during fiscal years 1994-98, while the educational level of the other occupational categories remained fairly steady.

- During the 5-year period, FY 1994 to FY 1998, significantly

more men than women were hired for professional and administrative jobs, while women were predominantly hired for the technical and clerical jobs. Also during the same period, significantly more men than women were hired for the "other" occupational category, which generally includes law enforcement jobs.

- The average age of new employees has slightly increased in recent years. The average age of new employees hired in FY 1998 was 35.1 years, while the average age of those hired in FY 1994 was 34.9

Table 3. Percent of new employees agencies hired through the competitive examining process (full-time permanent white-collar employees), FY 1994-1998

RANK	FY 94		FY 95		FY 96		FY 97		FY 98	
	Agency	Percent hired by the agency	Agency	Percent hired by the agency	Agency	Percent hired by the agency	Agency	Percent hired by the agency	Agency	Percent hired by the agency
1	VA	16	Treasury	20	Treasury	34	Treasury	35	Treasury	34
2	Army	15	DOJ	19	DOJ	21	DOJ	19	DOJ	17
3	DOJ	13	VA	11	Army	6	USDA	6	VA	6
4	USAF	10	Army	9	Navy	6	Navy	6	Navy	6
5	Navy	8	Navy	6	USAF	6	HHS	5	Army	6
6	HHS	7	USDA	5	VA	5	Army	5	HHS	5
7	USDA	6	USAF	5	USDA	5	VA	5	USDA	5
8	DOC	6	HHS	4	SSA	4	USAF	4	DOC	4
9	Treasury	4	EPA	3	HHS	3	DOC	2	USAF	3
10	DOD	4	SSA	3	DOD	3	DOI	2	DOI	2

Abbreviations: DOC - Department of Commerce; DOD - Department of Defense; DOI - Department of the Interior; DOJ - Department of Justice; HHS - Department of Health and Human Services; USAF - Department of the Air Force; USDA - Department of Agriculture; VA - Department of Veterans Affairs; EPA - Environmental Protection Agency; SSA - Social Security Administration

Note: columns do not total 100 percent because not all agencies are shown.

Reflecting its program responsibilities, the IRS hired all of the tax examiners and almost all of the data transcribers. At the Justice Department, the dominant employers were the Immigration and Naturalization Service, which hired all of the border patrol agents, and the Bureau of Prisons, which hired all of the correctional officers.

The Government's hiring pattern largely follows the priorities set by the Administration and Congress. Priority programs are likely to receive the best funding, and the agencies responsible for

Table 4. Educational level of competitive new hires by occupational category, FY 1994-1998

Occupational Category	FY 94	FY 95	FY 96	FY 97	FY 98
Professional*					
Percent with 4-year degree and higher	90	90	89	89	88
Total number of professional employees hired	3,496	5,207	3,677	4,734	6,045
Administrative					
Percent with 4-year degree and higher	71	65	62	66	64
Total number of Administrative employees hired	1,585	2,384	2,371	2,863	3,983
Technical					
Percent with 4-year degree and higher	26	31	29	27	25
Total number of professional employees hired	2,889	4,367	3,388	4,383	4,528
Clerical					
Percent with 4-year degree and higher	17	17	15	15	16
Total number of professional employees hired	2,440	4,364	8,723	9,853	12,131
Other					
Percent with 4-year degree and higher	26	33	33	31	30
Total number of professional employees hired	1,065	2,557	2,516	3,175	3,336
All competitive new hires					
Percent with 4-year degree and higher	50	49	38	39	40
Total number of competitive new hires	11,475	18,879	20,675	25,008	30,023

*Occupations identified as "professional" involve work that typically requires education or training equivalent to a bachelor's or higher degree with major study in a specialized field.

years. We found no significant difference in average age among the different occupational categories, except that those hired under the "other" category tended to be 5 to 6 years younger.

- The proportion of African Americans and Hispanics among new hires increased during FY 1994-FY 1998. African American new hires went

from 16 percent to 19 percent of total, while Hispanic new hires went from 6 percent to 9 percent. The increase for African American new hires occurred in the administrative and clerical jobs, while the increase for Hispanics occurred in all the occupational categories. The hiring of Native Americans and Asian Americans remained fairly steady during the period.

CHAPTER 3

Job Search Experiences of New Hires

Because our survey results reflect the views of those who were successful in their job search, it is not surprising that their views are fairly positive. Nevertheless, many survey respondents provided information about difficulties they encountered while searching and applying for their jobs. Job search experiences of applicants who were unsuccessful are not included in our data and would most probably be more negative than our respondents' views.

Relatives and Friends Were the Most Common Source of Job Information.

As figure 1 shows, relatives and friends were the most common source of job information, with a third of the new hires reporting that they first learned about their current Federal job this way. The next most common sources of information for job openings were the Internet (17 percent) and newspaper ads (15 percent). Ten percent of the respondents said they either called or visited the agency where the job was located.

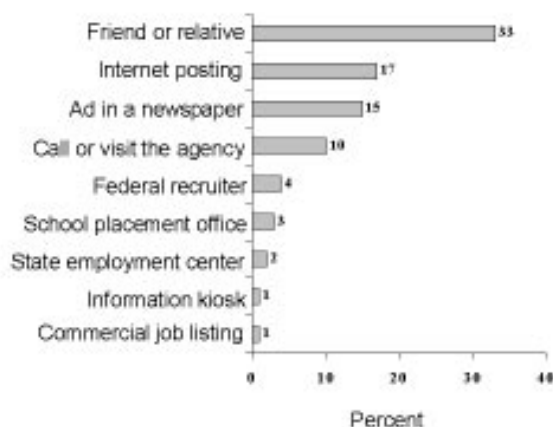
Relatively few of the new hires first learned about their jobs from commercial job listings, school placement officials, or Federal recruiters. Because agencies are more likely to use these methods to recruit for professional and administrative jobs,⁷ and the majority of our respondents were appointed to clerical jobs, it is not surprising that only

a few of the respondents first learned of their jobs through these methods.

Also not surprisingly, new hires who first learned about their jobs through friends and relatives agreed that it was easy to apply for Federal jobs. Of those who first learned about their jobs this way, 61 percent said it was easy to apply for jobs they were interested in. Two samples of their written comments on the survey indicate how friends and relatives may have made their job search easier than otherwise would have been.

My husband, who is a Federal employee, carried my resume to the personnel office.

Figure 1. How new hires first learned about their jobs.



Source: 1999 New Hires Survey.

Note: "Other" category totaled 14 percent.

7. U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "News from MSPB's Standing Panels," Issues of Merit, April 1999.

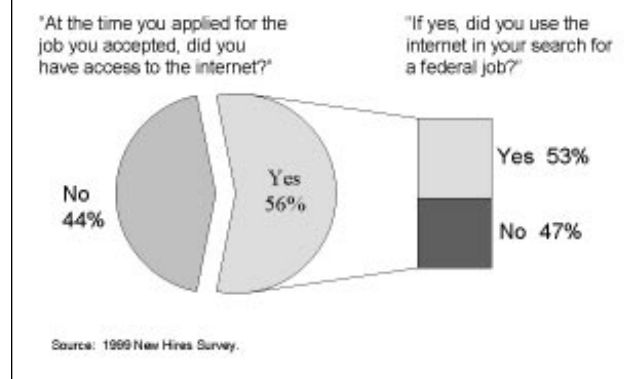
I would have never known how to apply for a Federal job if I hadn't been helped by a friend.

Unlike the situation in the private sector, employee job referrals are generally not a formalized program in the Federal Government. Even so, current Federal employees appear to be the most effective vehicle for letting potential applicants know of job vacancies. Our standing panel of managers⁸ also hinted at the prevalence of employee referrals of job candidates. In an October 1998 survey, managers acknowledged using a variety of methods to advertise their vacancies. However, the most common way to reach potential candidates was by word of mouth.⁹ In the private sector, employee job referrals are more formalized and strongly encouraged (by giving some form of incentive), especially for hard-to-fill information and technology positions. As the Government competes for highly talented employees, increasingly using its own employees as recruiters in conjunction with other recruiting tools could give the Government an advantage. Care must be taken, however, to ensure that referrals by current Federal employees do not become so prevalent that the merit systems principle that calls for “fair and open competition” is compromised. Referrals, in other words, should be a supplement to, not a substitute for, other recruitment methods.

The Majority of New Hires had Internet Access

The majority of our survey respondents (56 percent) had access to the Internet. Our group of new hires has more access to the Internet than the U.S. population as a whole, of whom, based on a recent Commerce Department report, only a quarter had access to the Internet.¹⁰ Of our respon-

Figure 2. Access to and use of the Internet to search for jobs



dents who had Internet access, half (53 percent) had used it to search for Federal jobs (see fig. 2). The number of new hires using the Internet to search for Federal jobs might have been higher had all been aware that Federal jobs are posted on the Internet. As it is, 47 percent of all new hires indicated that they were not aware that Federal job vacancies could be found on the Internet.

Given that the Internet is a relatively new technology and that it is used mainly for sending and receiving electronic mail,¹¹ our group of new hires is showing us that the electronic version of USAJobs could be an effective tool in attracting those who are connected to the Internet. But the Commerce Department report gave some alarming information that agencies need to heed. Currently, minorities, with the exception of Asian Americans, are lagging behind nonminority Americans in connecting into the Internet.¹² Although many technology experts predict that the Internet will become as ubiquitous as the telephone and thus the gap between those with access and those without will eventually be eliminated or reduced, we are not yet there. Until then, agencies need to ensure

8. In 1997, the Board established three standing panels—one of managers and supervisors, one of human resources specialists, and one of union representatives—whom we can periodically survey about personnel management issues. Although results from panel surveys are not statistically representative of the population to which respondents belong, their responses provide insights into what is happening in their organizations.

9. U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, “News from MSPB’s Standing Panels,” Issues of Merit, April 1999.

10. National Telecommunications and Information Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce, “Falling Through the Net: Defining the Digital Divide,” a report on the telecommunications and information technology gap in America, July 1999. The full report is available on <http://www.ntia.doc.gov/>.

11. American Demographics, “Business Reports,” August 1995, p. 14, and Modern Maturity, “Mouse in the House,” March-April 1999, p. 9.

12. National Telecommunications and Information Administration, op. cit.

that their recruiting efforts do not disenfranchise a significant segment of the U.S. population. Means of attracting applicants who are not connected to the Internet—such as newspapers, radio, professional journals, and TV—should be used as appropriate. This is essential for upholding the ideals that the merit principles espouse, i.e., that positions are filled by the best qualified candidate as determined through fair and open competition.

The Internet has the potential to become agencies' most effective recruiting tool because large amounts of information can be posted quickly and cheaply with the potential of reaching more people than a newspaper ad ever could. Presently, the Internet's power is largely still untapped. When asked how they had submitted their applications, only 7 percent said they had submitted them over the Internet. Most (62 percent) submitted their applications by mail, while others (29 percent) hand carried them or used a messenger.

There are various reasons why our respondents did not use the Internet to apply. Some of our findings suggest possible problems with on-line application that may have discouraged our respondents from submitting their application via the Internet. These findings include the following:

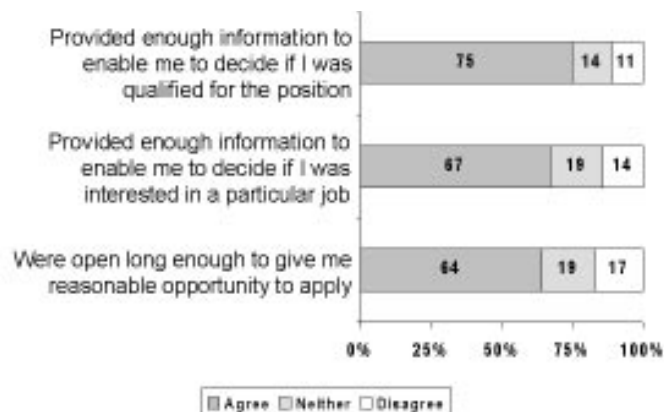
- Our survey respondents appeared to doubt the trustworthiness of the technology, as shown by this comment: "I worry about my resume losing formatting and thereby looking ugly." This concern, unfortunately, had some justification. In the mock job search we conducted on-line, we found that only a few on-line vacancy announcements had an option to "submit resume on-line" and all that had the option warned applicants that the resume might not be a complete application and might result in them losing consideration. Thus, although the option was available for some vacancies the warning served to discourage its use.
- In trying to complete an application on-line using the resume builder that was included in one of the vacancy announce-

ments, our staff encountered technical problems precluding us from completing the on-line form. The form did not include a link to the person maintaining the site that would notify him or her that a problem existed.

While all major Federal agencies have a presence on the Internet, many appear not to use its full potential to recruit applicants. For instance, we visited the sites of the 22 largest departments and agencies, including OPM's. We noted that some agencies do not have an easily recognizable link to their employment opportunity information on their home page. For example, in one site we visited, the "Employment" page was four screens down under the "Offices & Budgets" link. This kind of page placement makes it difficult for visitors to the site to find vacancy listings and could turn away a prospective applicant.

Even so, we expect applicants to increase their use of the Internet in searching and applying for Federal jobs as more and more people get connected and use it for a variety of personal tasks, including managing their careers. The Internet has already become a powerful communication tool for Federal agencies and one that many have found effective in searching for Federal jobs. Of those who used the Internet for such a search, 77 percent said it was easy for them to find out about Federal jobs. Nevertheless, the Internet is but one of many tools, and one that has considerable room for improvement.

Figure 3. New hires' opinions about Federal job announcements



Source: 1999 New Hires Survey.

Applying for Jobs was Generally Easy.

When we asked the new hires whether it was easy for them to apply for Federal jobs they were interested in, 62 percent agreed that it was, 22 percent disagreed, and 16 percent neither agreed nor disagreed. Related questions shed some light on why this group of new hires would generally think the application process was easy. For example, on the issue of whether enough job information was available, the majority of the new hires agreed that vacancy announcements provided enough information to enable them to decide if they were qualified for the position (75 percent), and to decide if they were interested in the job (67 percent) (see figure 3).

Figure 3 also shows that 64 percent of the new hires agreed that vacancy announcements were open long enough to give them reasonable opportunity to apply for a particular job. Not surprisingly, the longer the open period, the more likely the new hires were to think that they had enough time to apply. Table 5 shows that about 2 weeks to a month is a long enough time period, but a week is definitely too short if an agency is seriously interested in attracting applicants. Some respondents commented that short open periods are not sufficient if they have to request required forms by telephone or have to submit supplemental forms, because by the time the forms are received or completed, the announcement has already closed. Perhaps for this reason, 17 percent of the new hires disagreed that announcements were open long enough for them to apply.

Table 5. Respondents' views on length of time they were given to apply for jobs they got

Time applicants were given to apply	Percent who thought time was long enough
About 1 week	38
About 2 weeks	61
2 weeks to 1 month	73
More than 1 month	78
Could apply anytime	69

Figure 3 shows that a sizable minority (14 percent) of respondents disagreed that job announcements provided enough information for them to decide whether they are interested in the job. Comments written by some respondents provided insight on how they view Federal job announcements. A respondent observed that there appear to be no standards on what information is included in vacancy announcements or what forms are required to be submitted. Others wrote that vacancy announcements gave unclear instructions, or vague descriptions of duties.

Our mock job search gave us a better understanding of the respondents' comments on vacancy announcements. For example, we observed that:

- The quality of vacancy announcements varies considerably. Some announcements are well written and presented while others are poorly done. Generally, vacancy announcements appear to have been written for people already employed in the Government. The use of jargon and acronyms is a common problem.
- Some online announcements are quite lengthy. These can become tedious and difficult to scroll through and read online.
- Some announcements give brief or vague descriptions of the duties to be performed. Such job descriptions are not helpful when applicants are asked to describe what knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA) they possess that are related to the job for which they are applying. Their response is critical because their numerical ratings depend almost entirely on how well their KSA's match the requirements of the job.
- Announcements vary with respect to the type of information they provide. Some announcements include salary, type of appointment, or work schedule while others do not. Almost no announcements include information on retirement and benefits, such as leave and insurance, that may entice applicants to apply.

- Some announcements say, “position may be filled as temporary, term, or permanent,” but do not explain how long the term or temporary appointment would be. Also, applicants often are not instructed to specify the type of appointment they prefer, leaving the examining office staff with insufficient information about which option the candidate should be considered for.

Hiring decisions were made fairly quickly but other phases of the hiring process took longer.

When we asked our respondents whether they thought hiring decisions were made within a reasonable period of time, 58 percent of respondents agreed that they were, while 29 percent disagreed. Not surprisingly, this positive view was affected by how soon they got job offers. The sooner the respondents got job offers, the more likely they were to think that hiring decisions were made within a reasonable period of time (see table 6). Of those who got their job offers within 1 to 2 months after they applied, an overwhelming majority (77 percent) agreed that hiring decisions were made within a reasonable period of time. Meanwhile, those who got job offers 6 months or more after applying were much less likely to think that hiring decisions were made within a reasonable period of time.

Although a majority of new hires found that hiring decisions were made fairly quickly, there were certain phases in the hiring process that took unreasonably long. Survey respondents wrote that the time leading to the hiring decision (from submission of their application to the interview) took longer than the decision itself. Typical comments included the following:

Though I agree the decisions were made within a reasonable time, I feel the time from submitting the application to the interview was unreasonably long.

The time between applying (with a recruiter) and the time I was called for interviews was unacceptable. I had given up and thought I was not getting a job offer.

Table 6. Respondents' views on whether hiring decisions were made within a reasonable period of time

Time from application to job offer	Percent who agreed period of time is reasonable
1 - 2 months	77
3 - 4 months	52
4 - 6 months	43
More than 6 months	29

Our respondents also believed that they spent an unreasonably long time waiting to come on board after they were told they had the job. Completion of preappointment requirements was the reason our respondents cited most frequently for their long wait to come on board, as illustrated by these comments:

In my opinion, the hiring decision for my employment was made within a reasonable period of time. However, too much time was wasted going through the medical process.

After accepting the position I was not able to start work for 8 months because the background check took an inordinate amount of time.

The timeliness of the hiring process depends on many factors, some of which are:

Preappointment requirements. Job requirements are not limited to education and/or experience. Eligibility includes fitness and suitability for the job.

All new employees undergo background checks to determine their suitability for the job. For some positions, this may require a limited background check, which is initiated after the employee has reported to work. But for other positions, such as those in law enforcement or in occupations that give employees access to sensitive information, suitability determinations must be made before the employee is appointed. These positions require a full background investigation which includes a thorough review of candidates' employment,

education, medical, military, credit, tax, and criminal records. To start the investigation, selected applicants must provide complete information on their past and present employers, schools, banks, and residences. They also must provide names and addresses of relatives, neighbors, and friends as references.

Applicants for positions that are dangerous or physically demanding are required to undergo physical or medical examinations to determine whether they are fit and capable of carrying out the demands of the position safely and efficiently. Other positions may also require a urinalysis to test for use of illegal drugs.

Both suitability and fitness-for-duty determinations take time to complete but are necessary for the efficiency of the service. The citizenry expects that the people hired for public service be mentally fit, physically able, and of unquestionable loyalty and good character. Agencies should ensure that these determinations do not take any longer than absolutely necessary.

The degree to which the examining process is automated. Many examining offices still manually screen applications for legal and regulatory requirements, a process that can take a significant amount of time to complete. In an attempt to shorten the examining process, a number of agencies have automated their screening process, as our report on DEU's noted. Some examining offices are using electronic scanning programs that search for keywords in an application and then group applicants into broad categories. Others use automated systems that scan closed-ended survey questionnaires (such as the Qualification and Availability Form C) in which applicants make "yes" or "no" responses to questions concerning their academic achievements and work experiences.

However, we found in our study of agency delegated examining units that the use of technology in the examining process has mixed results. Some

examining offices were able to produce certificates quickly even when there were a large number of applications, but staff in other offices believed that the automated systems are not very sophisticated and sometimes make glaring mistakes. To ensure the quality of examining, the staff often performs manual accuracy checks. Such labor-intensive checks offset the time-saving that the systems are intended to provide. But as the technology becomes more sophisticated and the examining office staff becomes more adept at using it, time spent assessing candidates' qualifications could considerably shorten.

The examination used. Some positions, such as clerical positions at grades GS- 2, 3, and 4 use written tests to screen applicants. The exams are either scheduled or given on a walk-in basis, and results can be issued the same day since the tests are scored electronically.

However, applicants whose examination consists of a review of their education and experience undergo a different experience. More than likely, the waiting time after they have applied is longer for reasons such as the following:

- *A panel of subject matter experts may conduct assessments.* The rating of the knowledge, skills, and abilities may be performed by a panel of subject matter experts or by the personnel office staff. When a rating panel is used, it may take some time to convene all panel members.
- *The number of applications to be rated may be large.*
- *The application formats may be inconsistent.* No single format is required for Government job applications. Applicants may choose whatever format they wish as long as all required information is presented. The problem with such freedom of choice is that the inconsistency in presentation makes it more time-consuming for raters and supervisors to review applications.¹³

13. U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "SF 171: Not Gone, Not Forgotten," Issues of Merit, May 1998.

- *If the grade of the position is higher, rating the applications may take more time than it would for lower grade positions.*

Raters have to review more information and often have to exercise more discretion and judgment when rating applicants' qualifications for more complex, high-graded positions.

The way applicants are referred for jobs. Applicants are rated when they apply for an actual vacancy and also when they apply for certain positions for which vacancies have not yet occurred. After the applications are rated, the results of the ratings are either used one time to refer candidates for a currently vacant position or are maintained as standing registers for future vacancies.

A standing register is an inventory of qualified applicants who may be considered for jobs, as jobs become available. A certificate of eligible candidates can be generated and referred to selecting officials for consideration in a few hours from a standing register. However, from the applicants' perspective, the wait could be quite lengthy. Some registers are maintained up to a year, during which eligible candidates may be referred to selecting officials at any time for consideration. Standing registers are beneficial to applicants in that they need to apply only once and can then be referred for consideration many times during the life of the register. However, the likelihood that applicants will be referred for a job depends on:

- Whether they have a relatively high score, and
- How often certificates of eligibles are requested from the register. Frequency of request will vary widely depending on the number of vacancies to be filled.

Depending on the number of applicants on the register, their scores, and the number of vacancies that occur, many applicants' eligibility could expire without their ever having been referred for

a job. Some applicants may end up feeling their applications went into a "black hole" when in reality, there just was no opportunity for them to be referred. And when applicants are not informed of the status of their applications except when they are referred for consideration, those feelings of being "lost in the system" can intensify.

Certificates generated by case examining give applicants a different experience. Case examining means applicants apply under a specific vacancy announcement, issued by an agency or OPM, that may cover one or more vacancies. With this approach, applicants are more likely to be informed of their application status in a reasonable period of time. However, this also represents a one-time consideration for employment. Applicants must apply again and again for other openings that are advertised, even if the jobs are similar. This could become burdensome since the materials or information required to be submitted may vary with each vacancy announcement.

The interview. The majority of our survey respondents were interviewed for their jobs, but a sizable minority (14 percent) were not. When the need is great to staff a program and finding qualified applicants is difficult, interviewing prospective employees is sometimes set aside. For example, to meet its obligations during tax season, the IRS hires many seasonal and on-call employees in low graded jobs. These jobs have proven difficult to recruit for during the current period of low unemployment,¹⁴ and the shortage of applicants has prompted the IRS to hire almost anybody who passes the written test and the background check. In contrast, for higher graded or managerial positions, multiple interviews may be conducted, extending the duration of the hiring process.

New Hires Experienced Some Common Difficulties.

A little over 40 percent of survey participants wrote comments on their questionnaires. A few wrote about how smoothly and quickly the process went for them and how helpful the exam-

14. Federal Times, "Seasonal Jobs Harder to Fill," Mar. 1, 1999, p. 8.

ining staff was during their job search. But many more wrote about their difficulties in obtaining their Federal jobs despite the fact that they ultimately were successful in their job search. Their difficulties were varied but the following were the most common.

Feedback was late or nonexistent. Not receiving any feedback as to the status of their applications or receiving untimely feedback was one of the most common difficulties our respondents cited. They wrote about calling the examining office and getting no response, or being unable to find a number to call. The failure of agencies to provide feedback made a few respondents think that the organization did not care that they were “anxiously waiting” to learn about the status of their application. Some warned that the way they were treated could result in the Government losing high-quality candidates at a time when there is great competition for good employees. The following comments are but a few that expressed this view.

I had no confirmation that my application was received and that I was a reasonable candidate until after I had already taken a temporary job. [A wait of] 12-18 weeks can easily result in the loss of exceptional candidates.

I've also applied for several jobs I never heard back from. Some of these positions are on the Internet multiple times; however, I never hear back from them.

When I tried to contact the contact numbers, no matter what time, no one would answer and the mailbox was always full. I tried to correspond by mail but received no response.

Too much information was needed to apply. Another common difficulty our respondents identified was the need to submit a large amount of information. Their negative comments were specifically directed at the supplemental qualification statements (SQS) required in all vacancy announcements. The SQS, whether submitted on an automated form such as the Form C (where

applicants just darken bubbles) or as narrative statements addressing the required knowledge, skills, and abilities, was seen as the most burdensome. A few respondents found that using Form C made the application process less burdensome. But those who had to write descriptions demonstrating how they possessed the KSA's found the process repetitive and excessive. In addition, some believed that the SQS would not identify those with the potential to do a good job because the items were so specific only those who already have performed the job or learned the jargon could score highly. The following are examples of particularly instructive comments that respondents wrote to express this concern:

The job application I was asked to complete was too long. As I recall, I completed six “essays” which required a great deal of time. For applicants that have performed successfully at a graduate school level, there seems no purpose in answering these generic questions. The length of time required for completing the application was part of the reason why I chose not to apply for any other Government jobs.

The application for employment was very lengthy as well as repetitive.

The KSA's are a burden and could present an advantage to someone who has learned the jargon.

The quality of service was below applicants' expectations. A serious and common concern our respondents cited was not getting the kind of service they expected from the examining office. Some indicated that the office staff was unconcerned and unresponsive to their needs or unwilling to provide basic information regarding benefits and promotion policies. Others wrote about being treated rudely, receiving poor or confusing information, or having to call repeatedly to get the information that they needed. Comments about service quality include the following:

Staff from the Civilian Personnel [Office] were not willing to work with you. They didn't have

answers to questions. No benefit information was provided, said they didn't have it. As a reservist, I wasn't provided information concerning credit for active duty time.

The human resources people in the private sector were attentive to my needs and questions, whereas Federal human resources made it seem as though I was lucky just to be applying.

Folks in the personnel department were, overall, unhelpful and unable (and seemed unwilling) to answer questions. Often I got the feeling that they don't want to be bothered. This all left me with a very bad (or negative) impression about the type of people who work for the Government. I wasn't sure I wanted to be part of it.

The Impact of the Examining Office is Critical.

Among the many factors that affect the job search experiences of new hires is their interaction with individual staff members in the examining office. Many provide good service in the face of dwindling resources, but unfortunately there are others who do not—as the comments immediately above indicate.

The Federal human resources offices, of which the examining offices are a part, have been consolidating operations and reducing staffs during the 1990's. From FY 1991 to FY 1998, the Government's HR workforce decreased by 20 percent overall.¹⁵ From the point of view of supervisors and managers, the consolidation and downsizing of HR have adversely affected the quality of the service HR provides. In a Governmentwide survey the Board conducted in January 1996, 40 percent of supervisors and managers indicated that the quality of assistance they have gotten from the human resources office has declined since HR downsized.¹⁶ And the HR

staff themselves appear to share this view. In an October 1998 survey of the Board's standing panel of HR specialists, many of the more than 1,200 HR panel members indicated that the quality of the service they provided declined after the consolidation of their offices.¹⁷

Two of the most critical factors that affect the quality of service HR provides are discussed below.

Workload. In our study of the delegated examining units, we found that some of them receive hundreds of applications at one time and/or examine for numerous positions at the same time. DEU's with a heavy workload struggle to provide an appropriate level of service, which for most of them undoubtedly includes providing timely feedback to applicants. But heavy workload and shrinking staffs do not always allow for niceties like regular applicant feedback. HR has to balance the competing demands of providing prompt, thorough service to selecting officials and providing information to applicants. Many HR organizations handle the problem by including a statement on vacancy announcements, such as "Only selected applicants will be notified." This alerts applicants that they may hear nothing about their application and avoids false expectations.

The volume of applications received is not the only factor that affects an examining office's heavy workload. The variety of jobs for which the examining office recruits also affects its workload. The more varied the jobs, the more work it is for the office to do competitive examining, especially when most is done through case examining. To help us understand the workload of the examining office and the complexity of the examining process they have to conduct, we examined CPDF data on the types of occupations for which agencies hired in FY 1997. As previously noted, we found that Treasury and Justice hired the largest number of

15. U.S. Office of Personnel Management, "Federal HR: An Occupation in Transition," Washington, DC, 1999, p. 3.

16. U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "The Changing Federal Workplace: Employee Perspectives," Washington, DC, March 1998, p. 10.

17. U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "HRM Panel Concerns: Consolidation, Competence," Issues of Merit, June 1999.

Table 7. Top 10 agencies that recruited for the most varied white-collar occupations, FY 1997

Agency	Number of occupations
Navy	154
Army	150
Air Force	117
Health and Human Services	108
Agriculture	100
Justice	95
Interior	89
Veterans Affairs	74
Defense	60
Commerce	57

new employees through competitive hiring. However, there was less variety in the jobs they recruited for compared to the Departments of the Navy, the Army, and the Air Force (see table 7). For example, Treasury hired new employees for 51 different types of occupations while Navy hired for 154 types. Further review of hiring patterns showed that Treasury used written tests to hire about 90 percent of its new employees. On the other hand, Navy used written tests to hire about 20 percent of its new employees, thus conducting mostly KSA evaluations (unassembled examinations) to hire new employees. And, as we have already noted, unassembled exams take more time to complete than assembled exams.

Level of expertise. In addition to workload, the staff's level of expertise also affects the quality of examining services. It appears that downsizing has adversely affected the level of expertise in HR staffs. For instance, more than half of the standing panel of HR specialists who responded to our survey in October 1998 indicated that many of their most seasoned colleagues had left and that lost expertise had not been replaced. Furthermore, these HR specialists expressed concerns about their own level of competence and indicated that they may not be adequately prepared to deliver the level of service expected of them.¹⁸ Although staffs assigned to do competitive examining are trained and certified by OPM, the training is limited to

the mechanics of how to conduct examining and does not address the judgment calls that need to be made in doing high-quality reviews of candidates' applications. Without assistance from subject matter experts, examining staffs may be unable to make correct determinations with respect to jobs they are unfamiliar with. This lack of expertise can complicate and lengthen the process of reviewing applications and referring candidates. Because of this, jobs may take longer to fill, as one survey respondent explained:

The reviewing office that screened all applicants had considerable difficulty in understanding the unique requirements of the positions and in applying these to the applicants. This resulted in the announcement and review process having to be done twice.

18. Ibid.

CHAPTER 4

Conclusions and Recommendations

The quality of applicants the Government attracts and its ability to identify the best qualified among them ultimately determines the overall quality of the Federal workforce. Major changes to the Government's hiring process were made in the early part of the 1990's. Some of the changes included decentralizing the competitive examining process (in the past primarily OPM's responsibility) and providing a centralized automated system for all Federal vacancy announcements, which could be accessed by applicants electronically. Based on the job search experiences of our survey respondents, the changes appear to have had some positive effects. For example, most of the respondents who electronically searched for jobs through USAJobs indicated that it was easy to find out about Federal jobs in this way. However, serious service problems remain (e.g., lack of feedback to applicants).

More than half of the new hires surveyed by MSPB found it easy to apply for jobs they were interested in and thought that hiring decisions were made fairly quickly. As a group, the new hires were much more connected to the Internet than the general U.S. population, with more than half of them indicating that they have Internet access. Generally, those who searched for their jobs through the Internet indicated that it was easy for them to find out about Federal job openings. But word of mouth was still the most common way newly hired employees learned about Federal jobs. About five of seven survey respondents found Federal job announcements provided them enough information to enable them to decide if

they were qualified for a job and whether they were interested in applying for it.

Our data suggest that agency delegated examining units (DEU's) are doing a good job, overall, of conducting most phases of the competitive examining process. But there is great room for improvement in the area of responsiveness to applicants' needs, particularly with regard to feedback on the disposition of applications. Some survey respondents questioned the value of some parts of the examining process and indicated that they were discouraged from applying for other jobs because of them. Our survey respondents also found some phases of the hiring process took too long.

Where these flaws in the hiring process exist, they can severely and negatively affect the Government's ability to attract and select the highly qualified and motivated workers that it needs. Accordingly, we offer the following suggestions to improve that process:

Agencies should look for ways to expedite their hiring processes. Timeliness of the hiring process is a high priority issue for job applicants. Respondents to our survey warned that excessive and unexplained delays before interviews are scheduled or delays in bringing new employees on board could make some highly qualified candidates lose interest in the jobs. Agencies should make the length of time in which they fill their vacancies as short as reasonably possible for the type of job being filled. Agencies may want to collect feedback from their own new hires, through surveys or

focus groups, to determine which phase(s) of the hiring process work well and which do not.

Agencies should ensure that their competitive examining staff and those responsible for recruiting think of applicants as customers and treat them in accord with agencies' customer service standards. In a time of fierce competition for good workers, agencies cannot afford to short circuit their recruitment and examining efforts. Because applicants want to know what becomes of their applications, agencies may want to establish an e-mail address to which applicants may address questions about application status. Agencies should ensure that adequate staff are available to answer those questions. Or, agencies may want to establish automated tracking systems to provide application status information. In short, agencies should provide some type of meaningful feedback to job applicants according to the agencies' customer service standards.

OPM and agencies should improve how vacancy announcements are posted on the Internet.

Vacancy announcements should be an effective recruiting tool that helps sell the Government as an employer of choice. Electronic announcements accessible via the Internet should be visually appealing, informative, and easy to navigate. Agencies should ensure that links to their vacancy listings are prominently displayed on the home page so visitors can easily find them. Information on benefits and on how the application process works, a glossary defining terms such as "term appointment" and "ICTAP,"* and other information commonly used in Government recruiting should be made easily accessible at agency Web sites or through links to USAJobs, OPM's centralized electronic job database. Such links could help ensure that common information is available at a uniform level of quality and does not clutter vacancy announcements. In short, the Government's Internet job sites should be geared towards applicants who are not well versed in the Federal hiring process.

Appendix A. Occupations/positions for which written and/or performance tests are required

A list of these positions may be viewed at
<http://www.opm.gov/qualifications/sec-v/sec-v.htm> .
Or contact STUDIES@mspb.gov or (202) 653-6772, ext. 1350
to request a printed copy of this report.

Appendix B. Special hiring authorities for which competitive examining is not required

The following are some of the means that agencies may use to hire new employees in the competitive service without requiring applicants to complete a competitive examination.

- **Reinstatement of former Federal employees.** Former Federal employees who had completed 3 years of satisfactory service when they left the competitive service may be reinstated to another Federal job without further competition. Reinstatement must be at a grade equal to or lower than the highest grade they held when they were previously federally employed. Because they have gone through the competitive examination process once before, they need not go through another to be reinstated.
- **The Outstanding Scholar hiring authority.** This hiring tool allows agencies to appoint college graduates whose undergraduate grade point average is at least 3.5 on a 4.0 scale, or who rank in the top 10 percent of their class (or academic unit such as a college of arts and sciences). This authority applies to entry-level hiring for more than 100 professional and administrative occupations. The academic criteria are considered a substitute for examining, and individuals hired this way receive appointments into the competitive service. There are no provisions for competition among eligible candidates to determine their relative qualifications for the job, and veterans' preference provisions do not apply.

This authority, and the one described next were approved in the *Luevano* Consent Decree that settled a court challenge against a written examination for Federal employment used in the 1970's and early 1980's. If and when the decree is terminated, these authorities will also terminate.

- **The Bilingual/Bicultural hiring authority.** This hiring authority applies to individuals who are bilingual in Spanish and English or who are knowledgeable of both the Anglo and Hispanic cultures. It requires the selected candidates to obtain a passing score on an appropriate examination, but then allows appointments in the competitive service to be made without regard to how the qualifications of the selected individual compare to the qualifications of other candidates. In addition, veterans' preference does not apply. Like the Outstanding Scholar hiring authority, this hiring authority applies to entry-level hiring for more than 100 professional and administrative occupations.
- **Conversion from an appointment in the excepted service.** Appointment into the excepted service is governed by a large number of special appointing authorities established by numerous statutes, executive orders, and civil service rules. Some of these authorities permit subsequent noncompetitive conversion into the competitive service. Incumbents must have performed satisfactorily in their jobs to be converted.

"Excepted service" has two distinct connotations. It pertains either to positions or to an agency.

Excepted service positions in the competitive service agencies include positions that have been excepted by law from the regular civil service hiring procedures. Instead of using competitive examinations as the process for evaluating and ranking candidates, agencies fill excepted service positions using specific criteria. The following are some widely used authorities that agencies use to appoint new employees to excepted service positions. These authorities permit subsequent noncompetitive conversion into the competitive service:

✓ *The Student Educational Employment Program* (sometimes referred to as a co-op appointment). Through a formal agreement between an agency and a high school or college, students enrolled in the institution may work for a Federal agency. The work experience is treated as part of the student's overall educational program. Upon completion of all requirements of his or her academic program, a student may be converted without competition to a competitive service appointment.

✓ *Veterans Readjustment Authority (VRA)*. The authority to appoint post-Vietnam era veterans who have been out of the service more than 10 years expired on December 31, 1999. Post-Vietnam era veterans who have not been out of the service for 10 years remain eligible for VRA appointments until 10 years have passed since their last release from active duty. The authority to noncompetitively appoint Vietnam era veterans who have been out of the service more than 10 years expired on December 31, 1995. There is no time limit on eligibility for a veteran with a service-connected disability of 30 percent or more. VRA employees may be converted without competition into the competitive service after 2 years as a VRA.

✓ *The Presidential Management Intern (PMI)*. The PMI program was established by executive order in 1977 and is currently used to attract to Federal service outstanding

graduate students from a variety of academic disciplines who have a clear interest in, and commitment to, a career in the analysis and management of public policies and programs. Under this program, up to 400 outstanding individuals with advanced degrees may enter public service for 2-year internships. At the end of the 2 years, they may be noncompetitively converted into the competitive service and promoted within an established career ladder.

Excepted service agencies are agencies excluded by law from the competitive civil service procedures; all positions in them, therefore, are excepted. Excepted service agencies have their own hiring systems and establish their own evaluation criteria and procedures used in filling vacancies. Excepted service agencies may enter into an agreement with OPM prescribing conditions under which employees may be moved from one system to another without a competitive examination. The following are some excepted service agencies with interchange agreements with OPM:

- Tennessee Valley Authority
- Veterans Health Administration of the Department of Veterans Affairs
- Nonappropriated Fund (NAF) employees of the Department of Defense and the Coast Guard
- Federal Aviation Administration
- Civilian intelligence personnel in the Department of Defense
- Postal Service and the Postal Rate Commission
- Federal Bureau of Investigation