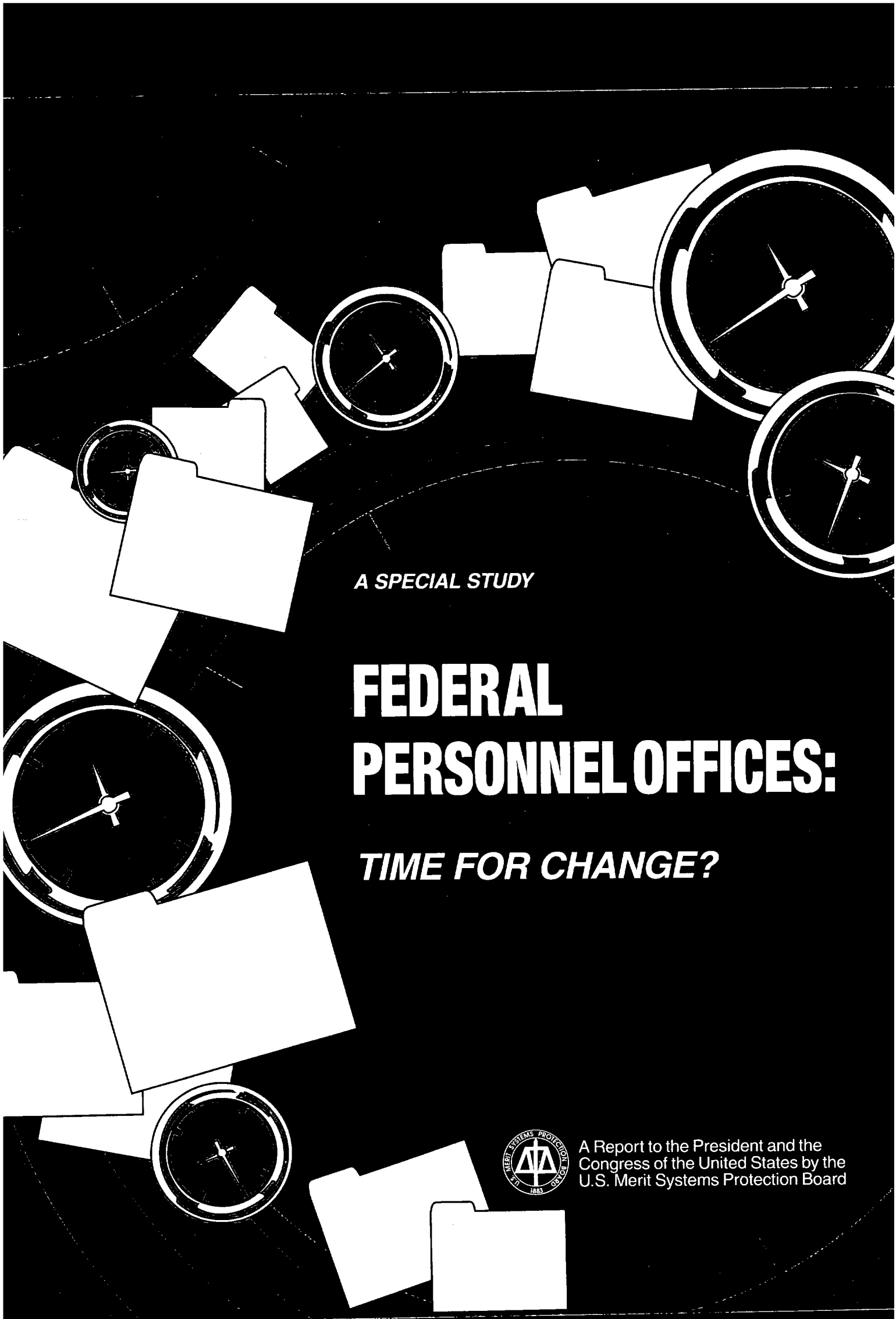


A SPECIAL STUDY

FEDERAL PERSONNEL OFFICES:

TIME FOR CHANGE?

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



U.S. MERIT SYSTEMS PROTECTION BOARD
Washington, D.C. 20419

August 1993

The President
President of the Senate
Speaker of the House of Representatives

Sirs:

In accordance with the requirements of the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978, it is an honor to submit this Merit Systems Protection Board report entitled "Federal Personnel Offices: Time For Change?"

The personnel office is an important factor in efforts to maintain an effective and efficient civil service system. Yet the managers who must rely on the personnel office often place little value on the work done by that office. This report seeks to describe managers' experience with their personnel offices, expectations of performance, and perceived causes of difficulties.

We find that personnel service is uneven because of a complex web of issues that often make the results unresponsive to the needs of the managers and unrelated to accomplishing the missions of the agencies. Our report discusses the implications of these findings and makes recommendations for better integration of the personnel function into the mainstream of agency programs.

We believe that you will find this report useful as you consider issues concerning the efficient and effective management of the Federal civilian workforce.

Respectfully,

Ben L. Erdreich
Chairman

Jessica L. Parks
Vice Chairman

Antonio C. Amador
Member

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The ability of the Federal Government to perform effectively on behalf of the Nation depends, in large measure, on the competency, efficiency, and motivation of the more than 2 million Federal civilian employees (not counting the U.S. Postal Service) in the executive branch. To assist in this regard, a cadre of over 36,000 Federal personnel specialists and personnel assistants are dispersed worldwide among approximately 1,400 Federal personnel offices within the various Federal departments and agencies. A basic purpose of each personnel office is to help its agency recruit, select, develop, motivate, and retain a well-qualified and representative workforce within the framework of a merit-based civil service system. If Federal personnel offices and their staffs are performing well, the public and the Government benefit from a more effective and efficient workforce. Whether this is occurring is the focus of this study by the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB or the Board).

As discussed in this report, Federal personnel offices, and the services they deliver, are often held in low esteem by the managers who depend on them for help with human resources management. Although personnel office staffs were frequently described by study participants as hardworking and well-meaning, much of their work was thought to contribute little to accomplishment of the agency mission. In essence, some personnel offices were seen as serving the needs of the personnel "system" more than the needs of their agency. The Board finds some justification for this viewpoint. We also note that there is a consensus that change is needed, as evidenced by the current search for ways to constructively revamp the present system. Improvement efforts, however, will need to take into account the complex interrelationships among the personnel system, the personnel office (and its staff), and agency managers. Changes to any one element of this three-part equation will almost certainly require adjustments in the other parts as well. Included in this report are recommendations for ways in which to initiate those changes.

One of the statutory responsibilities of the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board is to provide the President and Congress with periodic reports on the health of the Federal civil service and other Government merit systems. Since Federal personnel offices and their staffs play a key role in the operation of the civil service system, it is important that we know how well that role is being fulfilled.

To gain information on current issues affecting Federal personnel offices, the Board conducted onsite reviews at selected major organizational components in four executive branch agencies—the Defense Logistics Agency (DLA) within the U.S. Department of Defense; the National Park Service (NPS) in the U.S. Department of the Interior; the Forces Command (FORSCOM) in the U.S. Department of the Army; and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

These components provide us with a cross-section of some of the different environments and organizational cultures in which Federal personnel offices operate. The information and viewpoints gathered, combined with the other data presented in

this report, provide a useful framework for better understanding many of the problems associated with the current Federal approach to personnel management and administration.

Findings

- **Federal managers and personnelists agreed that the tens of thousands of pages of personnel laws, rules, regulations, and written procedures that govern the Federal personnel system are too complex, too prescriptive, and often counterproductive.** Approximately three-fourths of the managers and personnelists (personnel specialists and personnel assistants) participating in our study thought the complexity and rigidity of Federal personnel policies and procedures frequently prevented the personnel office from providing an effective response to the human resource needs of the organization.

- **Although many personnel regulations and procedures are intended to prevent merit system abuses, the consensus among both managers and personnelists was that they do not serve that purpose well.** Although intentional abuse of the merit system was thought to be relatively rare, personnel regulations and procedures were seen as being largely ineffective in preventing those abuses that did occur.

- **The complexity of the personnel administration process, along with its documentary and procedural requirements, was widely seen as consuming a disproportionate share of personnelists' time and resources, leaving few resources for some of the more substantive personnel management issues.** Some personnelists believed that the growth in complexity of the process has increased their work pressures and lowered their responsiveness without adding to their ability to help the agency accomplish its mission.

- **There are not enough personnel staff to do the work currently demanded of them.** "Lack of sufficient personnel office staff" was frequently cited by both managers and personnelists as a reason why personnelists don't respond to the needs of managers as quickly or as well as both groups desire. Simply adding more staff, however, is not a viable solution.

- **While managers viewed most Federal personnelists as hardworking and courteous, they raised a number of concerns about the capabilities and effectiveness of many of them.** For example:

  — Over half of the managers and almost half of the personnelists in our study cited "lack of sufficient skill in the personnel staff" as a cause for deficiencies in the personnel services provided by that staff.

  — Two thirds of the managers rated the personnel office staff positively "over all." In rating specific characteristics, managers rated them most highly on courtesy, with most responding that, to at least a moderate (or greater) extent, their personnel staff treated people courteously. On the other hand, only about half of all managers gave that rating when asked about the extent to which their personnel office provided timely, efficient service.

  — Managers expressed doubt about the ability of many personnel specialists to truly understand and address the human resource management needs of the organization. They were especially critical of many, although certainly not all, of those in "professional" personnel positions who had been promoted from the clerical or assistant ranks without formal training (e.g., completion of a college degree program

or a formal agency development program) or preparation other than their clerical or personnel assistant job experience.

— Personnelists indicated that the training they have received has been meager. When training has been provided it has been primarily on the technical aspects of the job and has not been designed to broaden the personnelists' perspective on issues such as the relationship between personnel management and the mission accomplishment capability of the agency.

- **Many Federal managers were clearly reluctant to accept responsibility for personnel management.** More specifically:

— Many managers saw some of the procedural and regulatory requirements of the personnel system more as obstacles than as aids to good management.

— Many managers said the processes their personnel actions must undergo are so complicated and difficult that they are incomprehensible. These managers view the system's constraints as "personnel's problem" and have little interest in learning the system they have to use on a daily basis.

— While many managers said they would welcome greater delegations of personnel authority, others did not want the greater administrative burden they felt this would impose.

Conclusions

Is it time for change in the way Federal personnel offices do business? In the view of many managers and personnelists the answer is "yes." Under constant pressure, Federal personnel offices ably fulfill many of their assigned functions. Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, some of the functions assigned to personnel offices are too often simply not done well or are of little relevance to line managers in their focus on mission accomplishment.

Contributing to the difficulty of the Federal personnel office's task is the number of constituencies other than line managers that vie for its attention and create workload for it. Federal employees and their representatives, job applicants, top agency management, the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM), and Congress also impact on the personnel office either through individual requests and inquiries they make or through systems, programs, record keeping, and reporting requirements they mandate. Collectively, these constituencies impose a staggering array of requirements, responsibilities, and demands—some of which reportedly have little to do with effective personnel management or the merit system. In fact, personnelists themselves questioned the value of some of the work they are assigned. At the same time, both managers and personnelists agreed there is valuable personnel work which isn't being done.

Improving this situation will require coordinated action on three fronts: (1) the personnel system and its attendant rules, regulations, and procedures; (2) the personnel office staff; and (3) agency managers. Previous attempts to "simplify" the Federal personnel system have met with only limited success, in part because they did not address all aspects of the problem. While undertaking simultaneous and sustained efforts on each aspect of the three-part personnel management equation will not be easy, the potential payoff is well worth the attention devoted to it. The following recommendations should serve to focus those efforts.

Recommendations

1. **OPM and Congress should give higher priority to efforts to reduce the scope and volume of Federal personnel laws, regulations, and procedures, but in conjunction**

with agency and OPM efforts to increase managers' and supervisors' involvement in personnel management, and personnelists' capability and competency.

2. Agency heads should provide the necessary leadership for: (a) reducing their agencies' internal personnel policies and procedures to a smaller and more manageable size, (b) delegating greater personnel authority, discretion, and accountability to their managers and supervisors, and (c) including their top personnel officials in major policy decisions.

3. In revamping the Federal personnel system, OPM and the agencies should aim to preserve the essential elements of the merit system and centralized record keeping and tracking, while increasing agency and managerial discretion.

4. OPM and the agencies should reorient their programs for evaluation of the effectiveness of personnel management, to focus on managerial adherence to personnel policies, guidelines, and objectives, and on the personnel office's ability to provide service to its various customers and to contribute to the agency mission.

5. OPM and the agencies should examine the various and sometimes conflicting roles assigned to the Federal personnel office to assure they are as compatible as possible by focusing on the contribution each makes (or should make) to the effective and efficient accomplishment of agency mission within the context of a merit-based civil service system.

6. Federal agencies and OPM should reexamine current screening and selection methods to assure their future personnel officers and specialists are of high quality and are well matched to the demands placed on the personnel office as it evolves.

7. Agency leaders should ensure that personnel offices have in place comprehensive development plans, properly funded, and that personnel officers and staff follow the plans. The objective is to ensure that future personnel staffs are highly skilled, maintain a comprehensive perspective, and are service-oriented.

8. Federal agencies, with OPM assistance, should provide additional training and orientation for their managers in the effective and responsible exercise of their personnel authority, especially as the requirements of the Federal personnel system are reduced to a more manageable size, and as Federal managers are given more authority and responsibility for operation of the system.

INTRODUCTION

Approximately 1,400 personnel offices operate within the executive branch of the Federal Government. Their purpose is to assist their respective agencies to effectively manage a very large and diverse civilian workforce of over 2 million employees (not counting the U.S. Postal Service). Over 36,000 Federal personnel specialists and personnel assistants provide personnel services within these offices or in higher level but related staff functions. If Federal personnel offices and their staffs are doing the right job and doing it well, the public and the Government benefit from the presence of an effective, efficient, and representative civil service.

Within this context, the Federal Government has long recognized the value of a merit-based civil service system. This was reinforced in the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 (CSRA), which begins by noting that:

> It is the policy of the United States that in order to provide the people of the United States with a competent, honest, and productive work force reflective of the Nation's diversity, and to improve the quality of public service, Federal personnel management should be implemented consistent with merit principles and free from prohibited personnel practices.

The CSRA also gave the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board significant responsibilities relevant to that policy. One of these is to provide the President and Congress with periodic reports on the health of the Federal civil service and other Federal merit systems. Since Federal personnel offices and their staffs play such a key role in the operation of the civil service system, the Board finds it to be particularly important to include an examination of those offices in its growing list of studies and reports.

The Federal Personnel Office Environment

Today's Federal civil service system started as a rather straightforward response to a perceived need for a more systematic method of selecting Federal employees. The assassination of President Garfield by a disappointed job seeker, and the ensuing Pendleton Act of 1883, capped a growing awareness that the "spoils system" of Government hiring should give way to a competitive system in which hiring, retention, and advancement were based on an individual's qualifications for the job.[1]

The environment in 1883 was a relatively simple one—only a small percentage of Federal jobs were to be covered by this new system and most of those jobs did not require specialized technical qualifications. The main emphasis, therefore, was on ways to select a relatively small number of employees from a very large pool of job seekers and to do so on the basis of qualifications rather than political considerations.

But 110 years later, the personnel office environment is considerably more complex and demanding. The large majority of the Government's more than 2 million Federal civilian employees are covered by the competitive civil service system and fill over 750 different blue- and white-collar occupations. Although there are still many applicants for some Federal jobs, especially at the entry level, many Federal jobs are highly specialized

[1] U.S. Civil Service Commission, "Biography of an Ideal," U.S. Government Printing Office, 1974.

and, for some of these, there are very few or no qualified applicants available. For a number of jobs, attracting the elusive "best and brightest" job candidates has replaced screening out job-seekers as the overarching need of the appointment process, but the competitive examining process has not adapted to this change. Moreover, Federal personnel offices are now responsible for a large and growing list of systems and requirements separate and distinct from the initial recruitment and selection process.

In the 1990's, for example, Federal personnel offices are expected to have expertise in a wide range of personnel management areas. These include labor relations, pay and benefits, employee relations, training and development, merit selection and promotion, equal employment opportunity and related special emphasis programs, automation, and performance management. Each of these brings administrative requirements such as data gathering, coding, documenting, and reporting. Moreover, new developments in these areas require constant adaptation, updating, and monitoring by the personnel office.

A number of the tasks and processes carried out by Federal personnel offices are intended to help meet Governmentwide public policy goals and objectives that may or may not have a direct relationship to an agency's immediate human resources management needs. Applying veterans preference considerations in hiring and reduction-in-force actions, and assuring equal pay for equal work on a Governmentwide basis through uniform application of the position classification system are just two examples.

Heavy administrative burdens and competing demands characterize the current Federal personnel office environment. Furthermore, personnelists are feeling isolated because Federal managers, for the most part, have relatively little day-to-day involvement in the operation of today's Federal personnel system.[2]

Personnel Office Functions and Staffing

The typical personnel office performs a variety of functions to support the operation of the Federal civil service system. Many personnel offices organize their staffs along functional lines, with a specialist usually performing each function. Highlights of the principal personnel management functions are:

- **Classification.** Includes classifying jobs within the Federal position classification system and setting pay based on that classification;
- **Recruiting.** Often called "staffing," includes operating the competitive recruitment, appointment, and promotion process, and determining the qualifications of job applicants by referring to Federal qualification standards and any specialized job requirements;
- **Training.** Includes arranging for and conducting training for managers and their employees;
- **Employee Relations.** Includes helping managers resolve problems with employee performance and conduct, and assisting employees with problems affecting their jobs; and
- **Labor Relations.** Includes helping negotiate agreements with representatives of bargaining units, and helping managers in the administration of agreements, such as resolving employee grievances.

The principal personnel administration functions, usually performed by personnel assistants and clerks, are:

[2] National Academy of Public Administration, "Revitalizing Federal Management: Managers and Their Overburdened Systems," a panel report, Washington, DC, November 1983, pp. 37-47.

— **Pay and Benefits.** Includes preparing and entering into a computer system the personnel and pay changes necessary to generate and update the agency payroll and employee benefits;

— **Information and Assistance.** Includes answering inquiries from and providing assistance to employees, managers, job applicants, and the general public on a wide range of employment matters; and

— **Records and Files.** Includes maintaining official personnel folders for every employee, and other records and files such as those created by competitive promotion actions, position classification decisions, and the performance appraisal process.

Personnel offices also perform ancillary functions such as managing special recruitment programs for minorities, women, veterans, and people with disabilities; award programs; savings bond drives; charitable contribution drives; and special projects like reductions in force or furloughs.

Typically, each Federal agency has a central personnel office. In large agencies, each major subordinate component also has its own personnel office. Each personnel office usually has a mix of personnel assistants and personnel specialists (this report refers to them collectively as "personnelists"). The personnel office's clerical staff may include secretaries, clerks, file clerks, data-entry clerks, clerk-typists, and receptionists. Because these support positions do not typically require the same degree of specialized knowledge of the personnel system required of personnelists, we did not include a review of personnel clerical staff in this study.

Personnelists are usually in either "staff" or "operating" positions. Staff personnelists are found in greater numbers at the headquarters than field level and perform duties that do not involve direct delivery of personnel service. Examples are duties related to program evaluation, program research, and personnel policy development.

Operating personnelists usually deliver service directly to managers and employees. Personnel specialists typically include classification specialists, staffing specialists, training specialists, employee relations specialists, and labor relations specialists. There are also personnel generalists, whose duties combine two or more of the "specialties." Personnel assistants provide support to the specialists and may have independent responsibility for some administrative aspects of the personnel process.

While focusing in this report on the personnel office's response to the needs of managers, we cannot ignore the other pressures under which personnelists also toil. The fact is, the personnel office has a great and demanding variety of jobs to do and numerous constituencies to serve. For example, personnel actions that affect pay and benefits must be processed within tight time cycles in order to assure reliable, timely, and accurate paychecks for employees.

Agency leaders, Congress, the Office of Management and Budget, and OPM also require many time-consuming reports of personnel activities and personnel data. Job applicants and employee unions are also demanding constituents. And the host of peripheral, labor-intensive activities mentioned above, such as annual awards ceremonies, savings bond drives, and charity drives, absorb personnel staff time. Managers must compete with these activities as well as with other managers and employees for the attention of the personnel staff even though the benefits from these activities may not be visible to them.

Purpose of the Study

As this report makes clear, Federal personnel offices, and the services they deliver, are too often held in low esteem by the managers who depend

on them for help with their human resources responsibilities toward accomplishment of their agencies' missions. This report examines the experiences and perceptions of Federal managers and personnelists in order to identify any factors that may be impeding the efficiency and effectiveness of Federal personnel offices. We note that the Administration's March 1993 announcement of a "National Performance Review" of the Federal Government also indicated that the civil service system would be a primary area of study.

This focus is particularly timely as managers faced with declining budgets increasingly ask whether their personnel offices are making a contribution to accomplishment of the agency mission commensurate with the resources devoted to them. In this regard, the cost associated with Federal personnel offices is not trivial. The Federal Government spent over $1 billion in payroll costs alone for its personnel office employees in 1989, costs that run about 1.1 percent of total payroll[3] and that are well within the range of 1 to 2 percent that the private sector is reported to spend.[4] But the total investment in our Federal personnel offices is actually much higher when nonpayroll costs are added, such as the costs of benefits, office space, utilities, equipment, travel, and training.

This study was also conducted against a background of increasing concern about the health and workability of the current system. Individuals in our focus interviews expressed concerns that personnelists are distressed by pressures of work, administrative burdens, and a dearth of appreciation. Also in the interviews, managers, and some personnelists, indicated that they viewed the personnel office as primarily the "enforcer" of prescriptive rules, regulations, and procedures. This was in conflict with an ideal view that other managers and personnelists had, that they should be partners working together to accomplish the agency's mission. This study also questions whether the existing system of rules and procedures is still workable in an environment that is vastly more complex than when the system was developed, or whether a much more sophisticated, decentralized, and collaborative approach is needed.

Scope and Methodology

This study was designed to collect and examine data about perceptions and experiences of a cross-section of Federal managers and personnelists regarding delivery of personnel service, as one measure of how well personnel offices are working. In particular, we looked at:

- Managers' and personnelists' views on the quality of personnel services they receive or provide;
- Managers' and personnelists' views on the role of the personnel office;
- The educational attainment, skills, and attitudes of personnelists;
- The supervisory training managers had received, and their perceptions of the personnel management authorities that have been delegated to them;
- The work personnelists are doing, and the system they are required to administer; and
- Possible causes of any problems identified during the study, and opportunities for constructive changes.

We began with a literature review and a series of interviews with key individuals in the public administration community, including agency managers, personnel officers, and academics. Our purpose was to gain perspective on the issues of major concern to managers and personnelists. The issues most often suggested for examination involved the complexity of the personnel system and the capability of the personnel office staff.

[3] Our computations are based on data published by U.S. Office of Personnel Management, Office of Workforce Information, "Federal Civilian Workforce Statistics, Work Years and Personnel Costs," FY 1989.

[4] Logan M. Cheek, "Costing Effectiveness Comes to the Personnel Function," Harvard Business Review, May-June 1973, pp. 96-105.

We then selected for study four Federal agencies reflective of the organizational diversity found within the Government. In selecting these agencies, we considered size (large vs. small) and mission (military vs. civilian). At each agency, we visited headquarters and field offices, making a total of eight environments studied.

Two military and two nonmilitary agencies were chosen. These were the Defense Logistics Agency of the Department of Defense; the Forces Command of the Department of the Army; the National Park Service of the Department of the Interior; and the Centers for Disease Control of the U.S. Public Health Service, Department of Health and Human Services.

Locations visited were primarily Washington, DC, and Atlanta, GA, although we also visited installations in two remote field locations in Georgia and Colorado. Although the missions and organizational cultures of the agencies we visited were very different, the information we collected indicated only a few instances where those differences had a demonstrable impact on the issues we studied.

We developed two questionnaires, one for middle managers and first-line supervisors (hereafter called "managers" for brevity), and one for personnelists, to collect data regarding their perceptions and experiences with respect to selected issues. While the questionnaires were intended primarily to provide quantitative data, we also used them as a starting point for group discussions that followed administration of the questionnaires.

We administered the questionnaires in June 1991 to 6 groups of a total of 72 personnelists and 30 groups of a total of 269 managers. The table below shows the number and type of participants from each study agency. The group size averaged about 9 participants, and ranged from 3 to 15 per group. After the participants completed the questionnaires, we encouraged them to elaborate upon their experiences and perceptions in group interviews.

The personnelists in our study were nonsupervisory personnel specialists and personnel assistants. These were operating personnelists, who provide direct delivery of service to the managers, although some also had collateral responsibilities for staff work which was not directly related to service delivery.

The managers were defined as GM-15 or below (and their equivalents, such as Wage Grade supervisors and military officers) who exercise supervisory authority over civil service employees. Partici-

Number and Type of Participants From Each Study Agency

Participants	Defense Logistics Agency	Army Forces Command	National Park Service	Centers for Disease Control	Total
Top Managers	12	6	10	7	35
Personnel Officers	2	2	2	1	7
Middle Managers and First-Line Supervisors	78	61	62	68	269
Personnel Specialists and Assistants	27	13	19	13	72
TOTALS	119	82	93	89	383

Note: The top managers and personnel officers were interviewed one-on-one. The middle managers and first-line managers and personnelists were interviewed in groups, and also responded to a written questionnaire.

pating managers were randomly selected by their agency personnel offices, to produce a cross-section of managers within the agency.

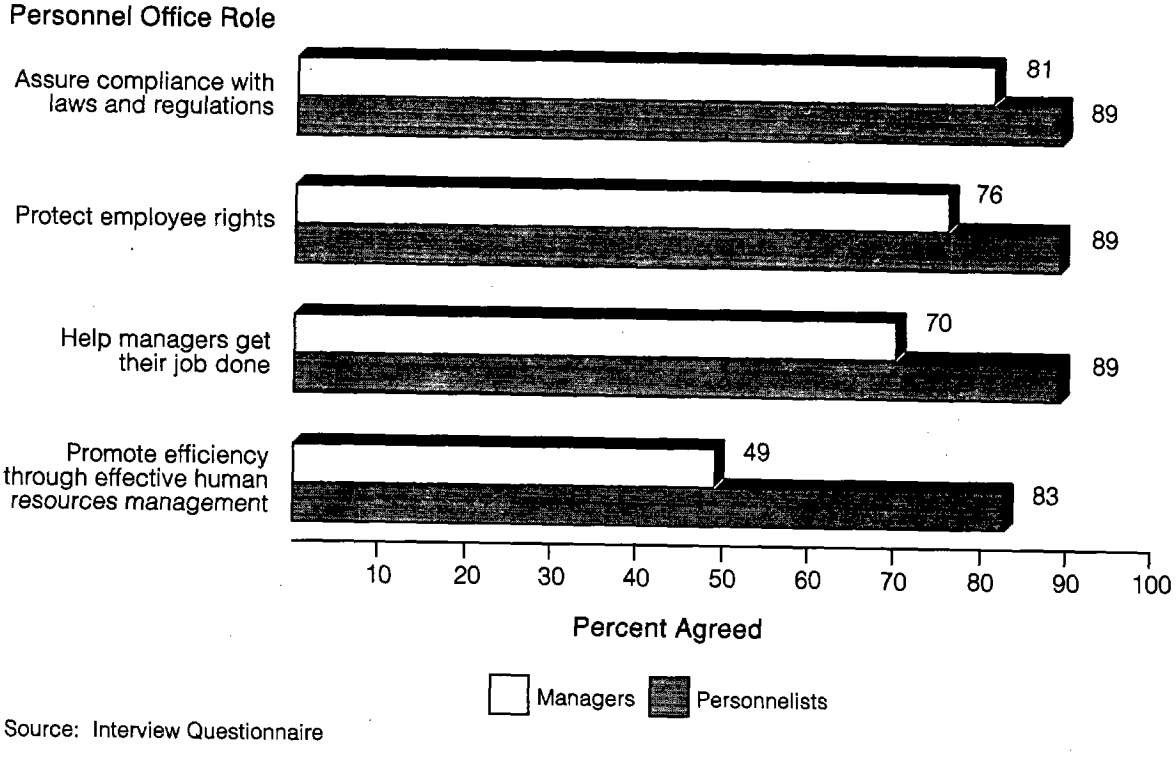
We also conducted structured, one-on-one interviews with 35 top-level managers and 7 personnel officers at the installations we visited. The managers held leadership positions at the highest levels of the organization, from Senior Executive Service members to assistant secretaries of Cabinet departments, and equivalent ranks in the military services.

ROLES OF THE PERSONNEL OFFICE

We sought the perceptions of both personnelists and managers regarding the roles of the personnel office, to learn whether they would agree on the basic purposes to be served by the personnel office. Conceivably, differences in their perceptions about roles might at least partly account for any differences in their perceptions of quality of service. On the questionnaires administered to both groups, we asked the extent to which they would agree that each of four specific roles is properly a role of the personnel office. Their responses are summarized in figure 1.

As the figure shows, the majority of both groups agreed that the first three listed roles are properly the responsibility of the personnel office. The greatest difference between the perceptions of the managers and personnelists concerned the fourth role, promoting efficiency through effective human resource management. Only half of the managers thought this was properly a function of the personnel office, compared with over 80 percent of the personnelists. This reflects some basic disagreement over who has—or should have—responsibility for this fundamental goal of good personnel management.

Figure 1. Percent of Managers and Personnelists Who Agreed With Selected Personnel Office Roles



Source: Interview Questionnaire

Some managers in our group interviews were particularly offended about such conflicts. They complained, for example, that position classifiers sometimes had the wrong reason for supporting a grade lower than the one the manager requested. In such cases, classifiers believed it was their responsibility to achieve economy of operations in the manager's organization—a responsibility managers believed was theirs—by insisting on a lower grade and pay for the job.

The Managers Speak Out

In our group interviews with managers, they tended to accept that it is the personnelists' role to function as the experts in civil service regulations and procedures. Some managers indicated they rely on personnelists in much the same way as they rely on their agency attorneys, to "keep them legal." These managers also expressed respect for the underlying principles of the merit system. However, they had very little respect for the myriad rules, regulations, and procedures that prescribe in detail how those principles should be observed.

Some managers lamented that the personnel office simply doesn't have the resources—time and subject-matter knowledge—to locate candidates for the hard-to-fill vacancies—such as scientists and engineers—so that the managers have to do it. Candidates for the routine vacancies—such as clerical positions—are usually produced by the personnel office, which sets in motion the processes for the competitive hiring system. Candidates for the hard vacancies—such as scientific and engineering positions—are usually produced by the managers using their subject-matter networks. Little active recruiting is done by the personnel office for either type of vacancy.

Other managers believed that the personnel office should do all the personnel-related administrative tasks, such as writing position descriptions, which they considered overly technical and onerous and in which they had no interest. They viewed position descriptions and other "personnel papers" as having no utility for them as managers. This belief was especially prevalent among scientific and technical managers but was common among all occupations.

Some managers commented that personnelists should use their expertise to help them "beat the system"; e.g., supply them with the "buzzwords" that would support the desired grade on a job—the "magic" that personnelists keep secret "to preserve their turf." Other managers would simply take the position classification authority away from the personnel office altogether.

In group discussions about the role of the personnel office, some managers said they were unclear as to what personnelists do, but whatever it is, it has little relevance and is of little value to managers. That is, they believed the personnel office exists for its own sake, and for the sake of OPM, not to help in the management of the agency. These managers were presumably expressing the views of the minority (see fig. 1) who responded to the questionnaire question that "helping managers" was not properly a role for the personnel office. Clearly, however, most managers thought the personnel office should help them get their job done although they were divided in opinion on how well the personnel office fulfilled that role.

A Vision of an Ideal Role

A broader, or "ideal," role for the personnel office also emerged from comments made by managers and personnelists in group interviews, and by top managers and personnel officers in individual interviews. Describing this ideal role, a vision which appears to be generally desired but seldom achieved, managers said that personnelists should:

- Be "proactive;"
- "Think like managers;" i.e., "consider themselves a part of the management team;"
- "Concentrate on the big picture rather than pushing paper;"
- "Be oriented toward the mission and toward service;" and
- "Delineate legal options for managers to achieve their objectives, rather than send the message 'we don't trust you,' as they do now."

Consistent with the managers' views, many of the personnelists and personnel officers we spoke with would like to take a more active role working with managers while still staying within the rules. Describing this role, which they characterized as "nonadversarial, educational, and more positive than their current one," personnelists said they would like:

- "To involve personnel staff in management decisions at the front end;"
- "To take a broader perspective on the organization, as well as to have the technical capabilities to advise managers;" and
- "To help managers plan strategy for developing a representative workforce, instead of pushing paper."

While most managers and personnelists agreed on this vision of an ideal role, a number of personnelists were vocal in expressing the view that the ideal role conflicts with the primary role of the personnel office as they saw it; i.e., to enforce the rules and control the actions of managers, whom they viewed as otherwise willing to corrupt the system. These latter personnelists clearly saw themselves as defenders of the system and the enforcers of the law, regulations, and procedures.

Thus, our study surfaced a contrast between the vision of the ideal role and the reality as well as a conflict within the personnel community—a conflict that sharply divided the personnelists we interviewed. Against this background, we look now at methods of determining how well personnel offices are performing.

JUDGING THE PERSONNEL OFFICE'S PERFORMANCE

Personnel offices have traditionally been evaluated by their success in compliance with law, rule, and regulation. Evaluators inspect records and review statistics to determine how well each office is conforming to these preestablished rules. Separate evaluation programs have typically been conducted by the Office of Personnel Management and by the agency. While a compliance component is necessary as part of OPM's legally defined mission, agencies have often adopted OPM's format without any component to measure effectiveness as seen from the manager's perspective. In our recent report on the personnel management evaluation (PME) program we note that one of the major problems in the program is " * * * that most Federal managers still do not see any linkage between PME and their efforts toward more effective mission accomplishment."[5] Thus, a personnel office may get good grades for doing *its* job well, but the perception of managers may be that it is not doing the *right* job.

> **"Technical expertise of the personnel staff, as reflected in 'audits,' is consistently rated high. But service to programs is low."**
>
> *A manager in a group interview*

Personnel offices' continuing orientation toward compliance significantly influences their responsiveness. Such orientation must be driven at least to some extent by current evaluation methods, which tend to motivate personnelists to focus on correct records rather than responsive service to managers. As a result, their energies may be directed more toward operating administrative processes, enforcing the rules, and completing documents, and less toward helping managers accomplish their agencies' missions.

Individual Performance Ratings—An Indicator?

We looked in vain for standard Governmentwide indicators of personnel office service delivery. We then turned to performance ratings and awards for individual personnelists, as possible indicators of performance of their offices. Our questionnaire asked personnelists about the performance ratings they had received in the last 3-year period (1988 through 1990) as a potential measure of the quality of the service they have provided. We found that, over the 3 years, over three-fourths (78 percent) had ratings of "Outstanding" or "Exceeds Fully Successful," the top two ratings on the Government's five-point scale. In contrast, less than three- fifths (59 percent) of the total Government white-collar workforce had received the top two ratings during this same time period.[6]

We also asked the personnelists to provide information on performance awards, monetary or other types, that they had received during the same 3-year period. Their responses indicated that 85 percent of them had received at least one award for performance. As with the performance ratings, this distribution of formal recognition suggests once again that personnelists may be doing very well in fulfilling the expectations of their supervisors. However, these awards do not necessarily

[5] U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "Civil Service Evaluation: The Role of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management," November 1992, p.vi.

[6] U.S. Office of Personnel Management, Central Personnel Data File, unpublished data, as of September of selected year.

mean that personnelists are meeting the expectations of their client managers.

A Need for Better Personnel Program Indicators

Others have recognized the need for better indicators of personnel office performance in delivery of service. The President's Council on Management Improvement noted that developing indicators of effectiveness has the potential for improving services to managers and employees. Specifically, such indicators can clarify needs and concerns; increase responsiveness in service delivery; identify personnel program weaknesses; increase supervisor and employee confidence levels in the personnel program; improve internal personnel office procedures; provide better justification for resource requirements in the annual budget process; and establish more meaningful performance standards and feedback for personnel staff.[7]

[7] President's Council on Management Improvement, "Applying the Best to Government! Improving the Management of Human Resources in the Federal Government Through a Private-Public Partnership," vol. II, Washington, DC, 1987, pp. 9-10.

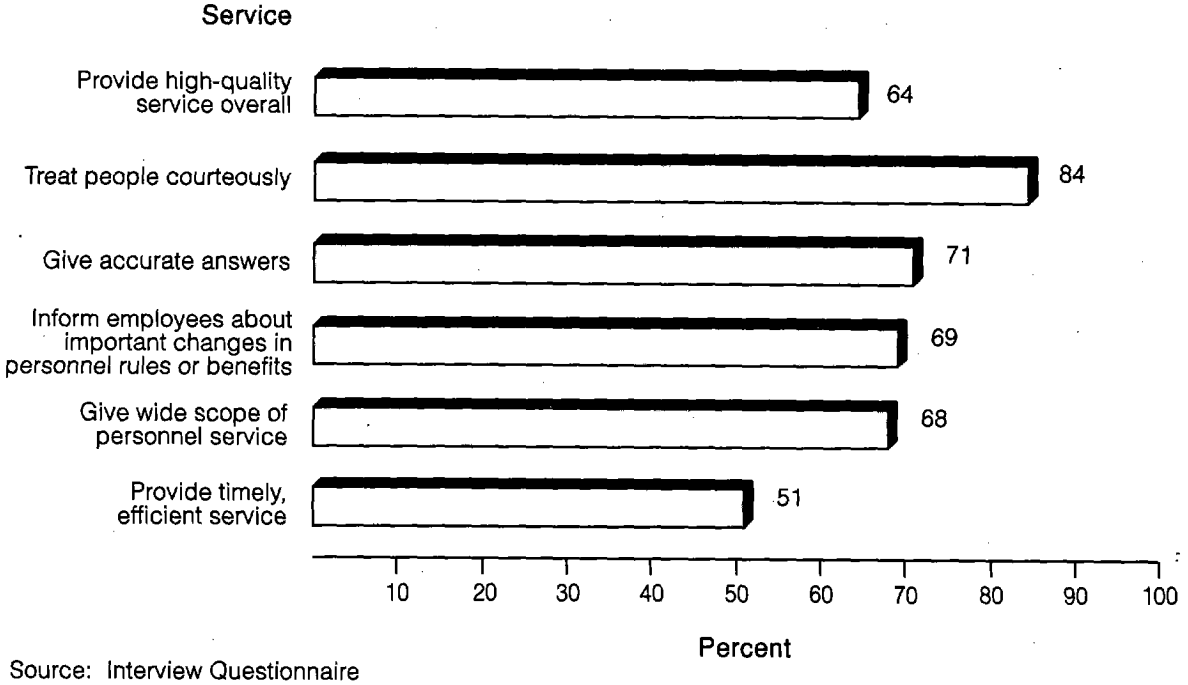
PERCEPTIONS OF SERVICE DELIVERY

In a further effort to measure the quality of personnel service, we included three related types of questions in our interview questionnaires. Specifically, we asked about: (1) the manner in which the personnel office conducted its business; (2) the quality of performance in each of five principal personnel functions; and (3) the timeliness of position classification decisions and actions to fill vacancies—the two functions of most interest to managers.

Managers' Views of Personnel Performance

Figure 2 shows managers' responses to a question about the extent to which their personnel office provided various aspects of service, as well as the extent to which they provided high-quality service overall.

Figure 2. Percent of Managers Who Responded That Their Personnel Office Staff Provides Quality Service to a "Moderate Extent" or "Greater Extent"



Source: Interview Questionnaire

In answer to the question, "To what extent does your personnel office provide high-quality service overall," nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of the managers responded positively; i.e., to "a moderate extent" or "greater extent" (versus to "a small extent" or "not at all"). But the personnelists overestimated the positive view of the managers, with 87 percent responding that the managers believe they are being helped adequately, very well, or extremely well.

While the responses can't be compared directly, they indicate an important difference in understanding between the two groups, with many personnelists viewing their service to managers as good, but many of their managerial clients disagreeing.

Many of the managers expressed the view that the personnelists spend their time "processing papers," work that may be done very well by their standards. But the managers placed little value on much of that work because they don't understand it, are not involved in it, or see it as having little to do with the substantive personnel help they need to do their jobs.

Managers' concerns about timeliness and efficiency—the aspect of service given the lowest rating by managers—were also the biggest issue in the group discussions. One manager said that personnel actions "drag on interminably." Another, complaining that it takes 6 months to fill jobs, said, "I have never seen any personnel action completed in what I consider a reasonable time." Personnel office staff members were acutely aware of this "timeliness gap" because they frequently receive complaints from managers. One personnel officer summarized the most pressing personnel issue as meeting his customer's needs on a timely basis.

Personnel offices received generally favorable reviews on the issue of whether they gave accurate answers to managers' questions concerning personnel issues (71 percent of the managers agreed, to a moderate or greater extent). However, a number of managers were very vocal in the group discussions and individual interviews about the costliness of the mistakes on those occasions when they received inconsistent or wrong advice from the personnel staff.

Some managers indicated that they attempt to learn the necessary civil service rules themselves so they need not depend on the personnel office for correct and timely information and advice. A few managers have requested that a personnel staff member be dedicated solely to their own offices so they could control the priorities of their personnel work. Several managers told us they even offered to fund such a dedicated position, but in at least one case the personnel officer declined the offer.

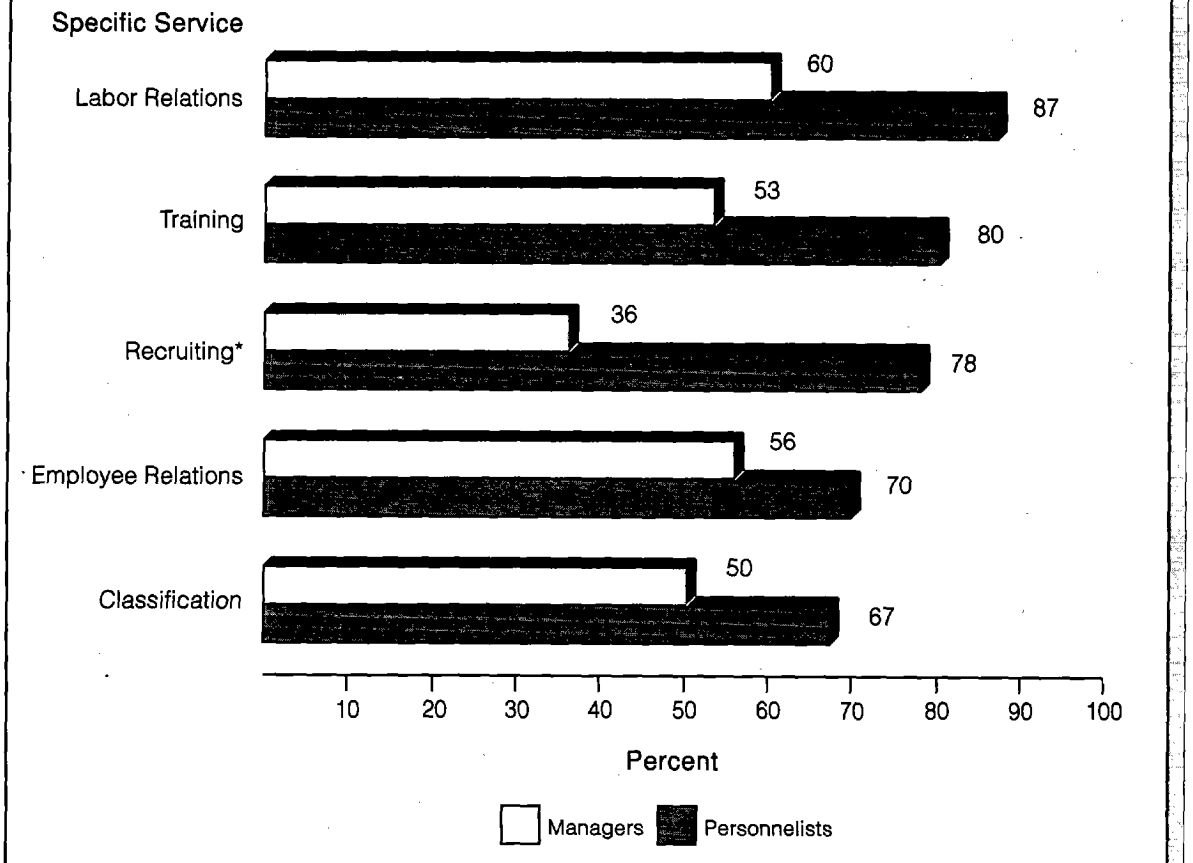
Delivery of Service in Five Functional Areas

In our questionnaire, we asked both managers and personnelists to rate the personnel staff's delivery of service in each of five specific personnel functional areas, on a scale of Excellent, Good, Fair, or Poor. As shown in figure 3, managers and personnelists had some major differences of opinion on the quality of service provided in these functional areas, with the personnelists being much more positive.

The difference in judgment shown in figure 3 is consistent with the difference between the very positive performance ratings and awards given to personnelists, and managers' somewhat lower perceptions of their performance, discussed earlier. Furthermore, from comments made in the group discussions, it was clear that managers were very aware of this difference in perspectives and that personnelists recognized and accepted that managers rated personnel services less highly than they themselves did.

The personnel functions most often used in daily operations, and the ones evoking the most intense response from the managers, were classification and recruiting. As noted in figure 3, these were also the functions rated lowest by the managers in terms of delivery of service by the personnel office.

Figure 3. Percent of Managers and Personnelists Who Rated Specific Personnel Services as "Good" or "Excellent"



*"Recruiting" is defined for this purpose as the entire process required for filling vacant positions, from seeking candidates to selection.

Source: Interview Questionnaire

Responses and group discussion results concerning the five functional areas examined are presented below along with related information from other recent studies.

Position Classification. In a recent study of the Government's job classification system, the National Academy of Public Administration criticized the system's complexity and difficulty of application.[8] These findings echo the results of an earlier study by a Government task force on classification, which judged that the present system is "in serious trouble."[9] While the present report does not focus on the strengths or weaknesses of the classification system, we did ask managers and personnelists how long they believed it should take to classify a job, and how long it actually took in their experience. About four-fifths of both groups thought that a reasonable time was 1 to 2 months. Managers' responses to questions about their actual experiences, however, indicated that classification actions routinely take considerably longer than this expectation.

[8] National Academy of Public Administration, "Modernizing Federal Classification: An Opportunity for Excellence," Washington, DC, July 1991.

[9] U.S. Office of Personnel Management and U.S. Office of Management and Budget, "A Federal Position Classification System for the 1980's: Report of the Classification Task Force," April 1981, p. i.

"The 42-year-old system the government uses to classify federal jobs is widely viewed as a dinosaur."

Tom Shoop[10]

Timeliness aside, we also asked managers to rate the quality of the classification service they receive. Half of the managers gave positive ratings—i.e., "good" or "excellent"—while half gave negative ratings of "fair" or "poor." In the group discussions, there were many such positive comments as "My classifier is a big help to me."

There were also many negative comments, revealing unrestrained frustration. Some managers reported that they sometimes "bend the rules to get around the system." One method is to hire prospective employees as consultants or contractors, at higher rates of pay than they would receive as employees of the agency. Another method is to misrepresent the duties of a position in order to support a higher grade than the classification standards would permit. Managers cited such examples as creating a supervisory position where a supervisor is not needed. This in turn permits the higher rate of pay that managers think would be necessary to attract and retain good employees.

Recruiting. In this report, we refer to the entire appointment process from seeking candidates, to the application of a candidate, to entry on duty as "recruiting," a process personnelists often refer to as "staffing." In our questionnaire responses, only about one-third of the managers rated the quality of personnel service in recruiting as "good" or "excellent." In our discussion groups, the managers complained most strongly about the service they received in recruiting. They were especially vocal about problems attendant to filling technical and scientific jobs.

As with classification, we asked the managers and personnelists to tell us their expectations as to the time required to fill a vacancy. The vast majority (80 percent of personnelists and 93 percent of managers) indicated that 2 months or less was a reasonable expectation, on average. Since most (78 percent) of the managers responded that they had actual experiences in that range, the inference could be drawn that the system for filling vacancies was often working within their expectations. However, 82 percent of the managers also reported experiences longer than their expectations, some as long as 8 months. This indicates that for many of the managers, the lapsed time to fill vacancies has been uneven, and helps explain managers' complaints about the timeliness and efficiency of personnel service, as discussed earlier.

"Except for the positions for which we have direct-hire authority, the appointment process can take years."

A top manager

The point of view expressed by this manager was in reference to scientists but was by no means limited to them. Managers raised similar complaints about other occupations, such as park rangers, secretaries, and clerks. Personnelists, too, saw recruiting as a troubled area.

Because many managers gave low ratings to the service they receive in recruiting, it is important to look at factors which are outside the control of the personnel office but which markedly influence the delivery of service. According to managers of scientific programs, recruiting was difficult because the Federal pay structure doesn't permit high enough pay to attract distinguished scientists. These managers were then frustrated at having to select scientists who were less than the best. This situation is reportedly widespread and predicted to

[10] Tom Shoop, "Classification Action," Government Executive, September 1991, p. 6.

worsen because, as jobs become increasingly specialized and technical, well-qualified applicants will become increasingly scarce.[11]

For this reason, a few agencies were granted permission by OPM to test innovative approaches to recruitment and selection under the demonstration project authority of the CSRA.[12] For example, the Navy is allowed to offer higher than the minimum starting salaries for new engineers and scientists in an effort to attract highly qualified candidates for these positions. Recent legislation designed to raise the pay for some Federal positions in the future may help attract good candidates, but those changes had not taken effect at the time of our review.

Managers, and many personnelists, felt strongly that job candidates are confronted with processes and forms that are not user-friendly and that discourage the "best and brightest" from applying. These managers and personnelists believed that private sector employers were able to respond more rapidly to highly qualified job candidates.

Managers in all four agencies complained that the recruitment process often produces lists of candidates who are underqualified. One of the reasons, in the view of a senior manager, is that "thirty-year-old qualification standards can produce 'qualified' candidates who can't do the job as it's structured today." Some managers of scientific programs said that the OPM staff and the agency personnel staff who handle the examination and rating process don't understand the scientific work to be done. Consequently, they aren't competent to properly evaluate an applicant's education and experience, and often refer a questionable candidate to the manager for selection. When such a candidate is entitled to veterans preference and cannot be "passed over" without documented justification, the selecting official is sometimes faced with an especially vexing problem.

Most of the managers we spoke with expressed their commitment to maintaining the order, equity, and fairness of the merit system. No one expressed any interest in opening up the personnel business to abuses like nepotism or illegal political considerations. But most agreed that the processes which have grown up to ensure merit selections have become far too inflexible, complicated, and slow. Such processes, designed to achieve "fair and open" competition for appointments and promotions, were viewed as ineffective in helping to achieve the goal of hiring (and retaining) the best qualified. Some fundamental precepts were challenged:

- *Managers supported the goal of selecting internal employees for promotion based on their ability to do the job but questioned the need for the competitive process currently in use.* For them, it is a farce to require a formal announcement and "competition" when there is clearly a well-qualified candidate already identified within the organization who has been trained, who is sometimes already doing the job, and who is invariably selected anyway. They see the required formal competition in these cases as a waste of time and resources for both the agency and the other applicants. Such a situation also has the potential to erode confidence in the entire merit promotion process.

- *Managers believed that, despite its restrictions and requirements, our current approach to the competitive appointment process still does not prevent abuses like hiring employees based on the "buddy system."* This perspective, also expressed by some personnelists, is supported by a previous MSPB study, in which 43 percent of the personnelists surveyed responded that they have "personally observed a selection for [a] job or

[11] William B. Johnston, "Civil Service 2000," The Hudson Institute, for the U.S. Office of Personnel Management, Washington, DC, June 1988, pp. 30-31.

[12] U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "Federal Personnel Research Programs and Demonstration Projects: Catalysts for Change," December 1992, p. 9.

job reward based on personal friendship rather than qualifications."[13] In that same study, only two-thirds of the responding personnelists felt that their agencies placed appropriate emphasis on complying with the merit principles, enforcing personnel rules, and protecting employee rights.

- *Some managers, including some who were themselves veterans, were critical of the way in which veterans preference is applied to employment decisions within the Government.* It is their perception that because of the veterans preference provisions they are prevented from selecting apparently more qualified nonveterans. The issue for them is not whether veterans should receive preferential treatment, but what that special treatment should be. Certainly, some approaches to the hiring of veterans have proven to be quite consistent with the merit system. For example, an OPM study found that veterans who entered the Government through the Veterans Readjustment Appointment authority perform significantly better than individuals hired under direct-hire authority or delegated examination authority.[14] But some managers and personnelists in our study viewed veterans preference as a factor unrelated to an individual's job qualifications that plays too prominent a role in human resources decisions.

The Government needs to look for an alternative to the present system that would preserve merit principles but produce more substantial outcomes with less process. One such alternative might be that managers could be held more strictly accountable for adherence to broad policy guidelines such as the merit principles, rather than forcing compliance through voluminous bureaucratic controls. In the Canadian Federal civil service, for example, managers have a far more active and direct role than their American counterparts in the ranking of candidates, both in external and internal hiring, and have more control over the outcome while remaining true to the principles of merit.[15] In the United States, by excluding the selecting official from participating in the rating and ranking process, we may have achieved an aura of objectivity in the appointment process. But some managers believed we may have sacrificed the desirable outcome of identifying the best candidates and selecting the best person for the job.

One way in which the present recruitment system may be producing unwanted outcomes is the popular use of informal ratings of education and experience, and unstructured interviews, by selecting officials and ranking panels. Personnel research in selection systems indicates that such traditional selection procedures generally are less predictive of job performance than more objective and professionally developed selection procedures.[16] This suggests that the Government needs job-related selection procedures that are more valid, less time-consuming, and more user-friendly.

In our group discussions, managers were concerned about outreach efforts to locate candidates for vacancies, efforts for which they used the term "recruiting" in the narrower sense. Some managers claimed that they had to do all such "recruiting" for their programs because the personnel staff had neither the time nor the expertise to do it. Managers in one organization even prepared their own handbook on recruitment without input from the personnel office. Personnelists commented that they would like to do recruiting but are unable to because of the press of other business.

[13] Carolyn Ban and Harry C. Redd III, "The State of the Merit System: Perceptions of Abuse in the Federal Civil Service," Review of Public Personnel Administration, Summer 1990, p. 62.

[14] U.S. Office of Personnel Management, Career Entry and Employee Development Group, "Quality of PAC Hires: Job Performance and Other Indicators for 1983-1986 Appointments in Professional and Administrative Career (PAC) Occupations," June 1990, p. 11.

[15] U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "To Meet the Needs of the Nations: Staffing the U.S. Civil Service and the Public Service of Canada," January 1992, pp. 25-26.

[16] U.S. Office of Personnel Management, Office of Personnel Research and Development, "Validity of Education and Experience Measures in Traditional Rating Schedule Procedures: A Review of the Literature," February 1989.

"When we do recruit candidates and they apply for jobs, their applications aren't even acknowledged; they disappear into the black hole and this alone discourages candidates from going through the long process."

A manager in a group interview

In one agency we visited, managers routinely recruited outstanding doctoral candidates from universities having the strongest graduate programs in the academic specialty at issue. The personnel office then ushered these candidates through the civil service competitive process to the new employees' entry on duty, a process which regularly took 6 months. This processing was very costly in terms of job candidates who lost patience and accepted other jobs, and of lost productivity from long-vacant positions. But in the view of both managers and personnelists, the appointment process had no value because the managers had long since made the substantive selection decisions based on merit considerations. The subsequent processing was only "paper pushing" in the view of both personnelists and managers.

Training, Labor Relations, and Employee Relations. As shown in figure 3 earlier, ratings for the quality of service in the three remaining functional areas were similar to those given to classification, and better than those given to recruiting. Over half (53 to 60 percent) of the managers assigned positive ratings to the personnel office's performance in training (often called "employee development"), labor relations, and employee relations. Again, their ratings were substantially lower than the ratings of personnelists, three-quarters of whom (70 to 87 percent) assigned positive ratings to their service in these functional areas.

In the group discussions, managers expressed a wide range of views about the service they received in training. One manager's comment typified the positive view: "The training people are very helpful, very creative, very talented; I give them a general idea of the needs in my organization and they come in and handle it effectively." Other comments were often neutral ("Training people are OK, I guess; I don't have any problems with them"). But there were also negative comments, such as, "I have to do everything; all they can do is push the papers."

In contrast, labor relations and employee relations, while receiving about the same ratings as training, evoked enthusiastically positive comments in the discussions and in the written comments on the questionnaires. The comments described these personnel specialists as highly skilled, responsive, talented, and professional.

We can speculate about reasons why labor and employee relations received more positive comments than other personnel functions:

- The personnelists involved in these functions typically are not bogged down in the production of personnel actions such as classification and recruiting, and are therefore relatively free to respond quickly to a manager's need.
- These functions may be more adequately staffed.
- Labor relations and employee relations cases often have contractual or regulatory time limits which force fast handling.
- The personnelists' role in these functions is more advisory in nature than is the case with classification and recruiting. Managers may welcome the help in dealing with difficult situations such as performance-based removals, where the manager still makes the decisions.

To enlarge on the last point above, it is clear that the nature of the work is quite different for employee relations specialists and labor relations

specialists in that they work more as consultants and advisors to management, in situations where the manager must make tough decisions. The same situations frequently involve problems that affect managers directly and personally so that a skilled personnelist is looked upon as a rescuer. In any case, these specialties may have value as models in future discussions of major delegation of personnel authority to managers and the shift of roles that will result as "mainstream" personnelists become consultants and advisors to management.

PERCEIVED CAUSES OF PROBLEMS

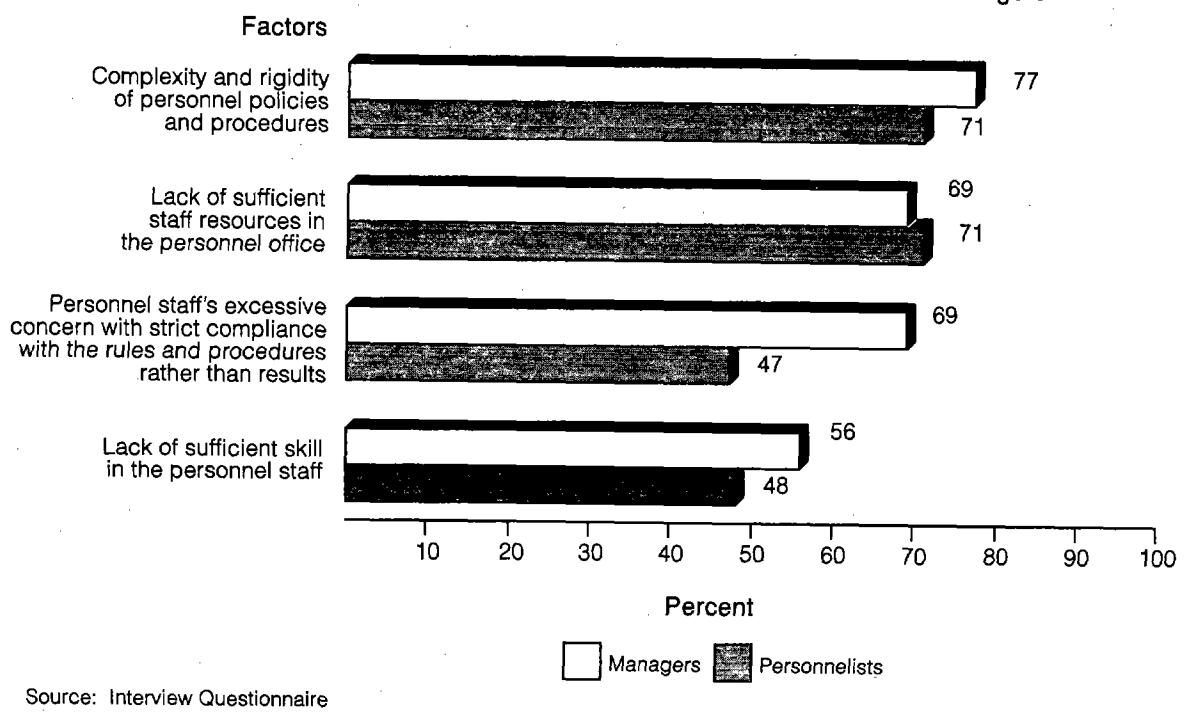
Following the discussion of perceptions of service quality in five main functional areas, we sought the perceptions of managers and personnelists as to the causes of any problems they have experienced in delivery of good quality personnel service. We next sought information about training and delegations of authority managers had received, in order to assess the capability of the managers to conduct their part of the relationship with the personnel staff effectively.

We asked the managers and personnelists who participated in our study to what extent four possible conditions may be causes of any difficulties managers may be having with delivery of personnel services:

- Complexity and rigidity of personnel policy and procedures.
- Lack of sufficient staff resources in the personnel office.
- Personnel staff's excessive concern with strict compliance with the rules and procedures rather than results.
- Personnel staff's lack of sufficient skill.

The percentages of those who responded that "to "some extent" or to a "large extent" these conditions are causes of difficulty are shown in figure 4.

Figure 4. Percent of Managers and Personnelists Who Agreed to "Some Extent" or a "Large Extent" that Selected Factors Are Causes of Difficulties to Managers



Source: Interview Questionnaire

Is the System Too Complex and Rigid?

More than three-quarters of the managers responded that complexity and rigidity of current personnel policies and procedures were causes of their difficulties. Nearly three-quarters of the personnelists agreed. This view that there were problems with the system itself received the strongest agreement of the four causes offered in the survey.

> **"OPM and Congress are micromanaging the personnel system and are slowly strangling us. They need to get out of our business and let us manage."**
>
> *A manager in a group interview*

Most managers viewed the present personnel system, while better than no system, as an obstacle that they must overcome in order to manage an organization. Managers also complained that the system is too rigid to accommodate the needs of different organizations with different missions. They believed that too much energy is being consumed in forcing actions to conform to detailed prescriptions for the sake of consistency, when good judgment might suggest better solutions.

> **"[L]ike a howitzer brought out to shoot ants, [the Civil Service Act of 1883] left us with other problems. Designed for a government of clerks, civil service became a straitjacket in an era of knowledge workers."**
>
> *David Osborne and Ted Gaebler*[17]

No one disagrees that the "system" is huge. Some facts about the size of the system in terms of formal, printed matter can provide some perspective:

- The Federal law (Title 5 of the U.S. Code) alone consists of 850 pages, and there is related material in other titles of the statutes, such as Title 29, the Fair Labor Standards Act.
- There are over 1,300 pages in the regulations published by the Office of Personnel Management (Title 5 of the Code of Federal Regulations) to prescribe implementation of the statutes.
- There are some 7,000 pages in the Federal Personnel Manual (FPM) published by OPM. Providing more detail than the basic FPM are supplements, such as FPM Supplement 296-33, whose 900 pages give instructions on completing Standard Form 50, "Notification of Personnel Action."
- There are nearly 12,000 pages in the white-collar position classification standards, and 1,800 pages in the blue-collar job grading system.
- Many agencies publish their own voluminous implementing policies and procedures. Large agencies which are further divided into subagencies have multiple layers of implementing policies and procedures. The Defense Department, for example, has collected some 30,000 pages of printed material from the Departments of the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force, in a recent effort to consolidate and reduce their civilian personnel policies and procedures.[18]

[17] David Osborne and Ted Gaebler, "Reinventing Government—How the Entrepreneurial Spirit Is Transforming the Public Sector," Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Reading, MA, April 1992, pp. 124-125.

[18] Bill McAllister, "Pentagon Begins Unifying Civilian Employee Rules," the Washington Post, Aug. 10, 1992, p. A-17.

> **"The one thing red tape is good for [is] to bundle up yesterday in neat packages."**
>
> *Peter Drucker*[19]

Another vast body of material is the case law which has built up from court decisions and from administrative decisions from agencies such as MSPB, the Federal Labor Relations Authority, and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Personnelists who are in the business of dispute resolution are required to know the different forums for employee redress that these agencies administer. These forums include the discrimination complaint process, whistleblower protection process, administrative grievance process, union grievance process, unfair labor practice process, MSPB appeals process, and civil lawsuits.

> **"Federal managers * * * [are] captives of a series of cumbersome internal management 'systems' which they do not control. These systems have tended to become so rigid, stultifying, and burdened with red tape that * * * [managers'] capacity to serve the public on a responsive and low-cost basis is seriously undermined."**
>
> *NAPA*[20]

The inordinate complexity that was built into virtually every aspect of personnel management is reported to be growing. Personnelists in our study noted that new laws, regulations, and procedures are added year by year, compounding the complexity of various processes and systems administered by personnel offices but bringing no additional staff to handle the extra workload. The following are some illustrative examples of the problem but are by no means inclusive:

- Recent changes to an already complicated retirement system have rendered it increasingly difficult to administer. In addition to having to master dual systems (Federal Employees Retirement System and Civil Service Retirement System), personnel offices have seen the advent of Social Security Offset and Windfall provisions, special plans for groups such as law enforcement officers and firefighters, claims to retirement benefits by ex-spouses, and State source taxes, all of which have added to the knowledge requirements for some personnelists and the time and effort required to process a retirement case with care.

- The Thrift Savings Plan, the Federal equivalent of 401(k) plans in the private sector, another recent addition, requires over 30 forms, for purposes such as enrollment in three different funds, interfund transfers, loans, vesting, refunds upon separation, annuity options, and a semiannual open season for changing enrollments. Some personnel office staff also need to be knowledgeable enough to counsel employees on each of these.

- The last two decades have witnessed the coming of computerized pay, and with that the responsibility for pay administration has moved from the payroll office, typically a branch of the comptroller's office, to the personnel office, on the correct assumption that changes to pay are generated mostly by personnel changes. Recent legislation (Federal Employees Pay Comparability Act of 1990, or FEPCA) has dramatically increased the complexity of pay administration through the addition of new sys-

[19] Peter F. Drucker, "The Age of Discontinuity: Guidelines to Our Changing Society," Harper & Row, New York, NY, 1968, p. 222.
[20] National Academy of Public Administration, "Revitalizing Federal Management: Managers and Their Overburdened Systems," a panel report, Washington, DC, November 1983, p. vii.

tems such as recruitment bonuses and locality pay. Also, special salary rates for certain occupations, grades, and locations have become an ever-changing maze involving increased paperwork for personnel office staffs.

- The Senior Executive Service (SES), introduced by the CSRA in 1979, has brought performance review boards; executive resources boards; a whole new employment system, including OPM's Qualification Review Boards, expanded executive development, and, more recently, recertification of senior executives based on performance. Administration and coordination of all of these have become the responsibility of the personnel office.

- The CSRA also created a greatly expanded performance management system for employees, including the Performance Management and Recognition System for midlevel managers at grades GS/GM 13 through 15. Personnel offices have responsibility for administering this system, and their job has been made more difficult by substantial changes to the system in the past 15 years. More changes are a real possibility because the authorizing legislation "sunsets" in 1993 and could be replaced by yet another performance management system.

- As another example, the pace of growth in Federal personnel systems and processes accelerated in the recent past. The processes of employee redress, such as appeals to MSPB and the discrimination complaint process, are more complex and legalistic than they were a decade ago, and cover many more employees. The Employee Assistance Program and the Drug Free Workplace Programs are also recent additions. And the advent of computerized personnel administration has introduced a new dimension to personnel work that places new demands on the personnel staff.

- Reporting requirements, already burdensome, have multiplied. Recent additions include reports on the Federal Drug Free Workplace, the Student Volunteer Service, the Federal Employees Counseling Program, and SES recertification. While many recurring reports are computer generated, others must be manually researched and prepared or individually programmed–both efforts that require a substantial investment of staff time from the personnel office.

- Other recent changes, like increased attention to persons with disabilities and verification of military draft registration, have complicated an already difficult appointment process. The extensive delegation of examining and certifying authority from OPM to agencies has been welcomed for improving responsiveness in the hiring process, but has placed a substantial workload on agency personnel offices. Recent concerns about AIDS, sexual harassment, and cultural diversity in the workplace have created the need for massive training programs to bring about cultural changes in agencies, placing additional requirements on the personnel staff.

In view of the growing complexity of the Federal personnel system, we pose these questions:

- Is it realistic to expect the typical personnelist to master even a part of such a system?

- Is it realistic to expect the typical manager to comprehend such a system?

- Can the average employee comprehend the system well enough to make good decisions regarding his or her employment conditions?

"The kind of governments that developed during the industrial era, with their sluggish, centralized bureaucracies, their preoccupation with rules and regulations, and their hierarchical chains of command, no longer work very well * * * in the rapidly changing, information-rich, knowledge-intensive society and economy of the 1990's."

David Osborne and Ted Gaebler[21]

Previous attempts by OPM to streamline the Federal personnel system by reducing the amount of prescriptive regulations and procedures have met with limited success, largely because of resistance from Federal personnelists and agency managers. One possible explanation for this resistance is that they were not prepared to deal with a more streamlined process and broader policy guidelines that required more decisionmaking, risk-taking, accountability, and initiative.

A surprising number of managers and personnelists placed their hopes for relief from the present system on further automation of personnel processes. They viewed automation as their hope for faster, easier personnel processes and lower frustration levels, especially in filling vacancies. One top manager identified the need for further automation as the most pressing issue. Other managers cited the performance management system as an especially irksome process that could be helped by further automation. Other managers praised certain systems which have already been computerized and are working very well, as is the case with personnel action requests (SF-52), which are created, transmitted, and tracked electronically.

But a question remains as to whether troublesome or poorly designed processes for staffing, classification, and performance management should not first be fixed, before an automation cure is attempted. While there is substantial potential for benefits from automating classification, for example, many managers and personnelists believed that the classification system itself is in need of major reforms to address perceived problems that automation alone cannot cure.

The interest in automation expressed by the managers and personnelists participating in our study extends well beyond the sample agencies we looked at. Federal directors of personnel from all agencies expressed great interest, during their January 1991 conference in Charlottesville, VA, in having OPM adopt an active leadership role with regard to automating personnel functions.[22] In response, OPM developed an "Agency/OPM Strategic Plan for Personnel Automation." In addition, personnel offices in many agencies have developed automated systems for various aspects of the personnel operation. OPM has collected summaries of these systems and published them, together with the name and telephone number of a contact person for each system.[23]

"We're going to have to develop the expertise to automate a lot of things, especially the personnel system, which is now so labor intensive."

A manager in a group interview

The goal for the use of automation in Federal personnel management is expressed in the following OPM vision statement:

[21] Osborne and Gaebler, op. cit., pp. 11-12.

[22] U.S. Office of Personnel Management, Memorandum for Directors of Personnel, from then-Director Constance Berry Newman, Oct. 8, 1991.

[23] U.S. Office of Personnel Management, Personnel Systems and Oversight Group, "Inventory of Personnel Automation Projects in Federal Agencies," June 1991.

> Agencies and OPM will exploit the application of computer technology in agency personnel operations and at agency interfaces with OPM to reduce paperwork, increase the efficiency of personnel operations, and provide excellent information services to the personnel function's customers—applicants for Federal jobs, Federal employees and managers, and the general public.[24]

The growth of legislation, regulations, and procedures, and their resistance to simplification, are an expensive burden that may need reexamining in light of their present usefulness and cost. The potential for and costs of further complicating the system should be carefully weighed before issuing additional legislation or regulations.

Does the Personnel Office Have Enough People?

Federal personnel offices employed over 36,000 personnelists in 1991, an 8-percent increase from 1981, twice the rate of growth for total Government employees.[25] But in response to the question "To what extent are the difficulties caused by lack of sufficient resources in the personnel office?," a majority of both managers and personnelists responded that, to a large extent or to some extent, "lack of sufficient personnel office staff" was a cause of the problems. This response from the personnelists was consistent with their frequent comments about being overworked, but the fact that so many managers agreed with them was unexpected; only 15 percent disagreed.

Some personnelists believed that their understaffing is the result of increased administrative responsibilities in a system whose continuing growth in complexity is not helping agencies in accomplishing their missions. The ongoing mismatch between the demands placed on them and the staff resources available has been a constant source of frustration and stress for the personnelists in our study.

Managers pointed to increased responsibilities of the personnel staff, such as the new programs and new regulations described earlier, to be accomplished with the same or smaller numbers of staff. Others mentioned that the number of employees in the agency had grown while the personnel staff had not. And still others, referring to the closing of bases in military agencies, commented on the unusual strains placed on the personnel staff in handling reductions in force while carrying on routine personnel business under a hiring freeze.

Some managers complained that when the assigned personnelist is unavailable, there is no one to carry on that person's work, which then lies dormant until the personnelist returns. Also, some managers commented that the mix in personnel offices is wrong; they wanted more depth in clerical and technical staff to handle the heavy paper processing and thereby relieve the personnel specialists for delivery of specialist services.

Several personnel officers commented that Congress, OPM, and the agencies need to build into any new personnel management responsibilities the staff resources to accomplish them. Some personnelists thought that their agency leadership doesn't push hard enough for adequate resources for the personnel offices.

Adding more people to the personnel offices is not necessarily the best solution, and is especially questionable during periods of shrinking budgets and agency cutbacks. But if Congress, OPM, and the agencies could substantially reduce the system and its processes, personnelists would have more time to respond to the needs of their organizations and managers. In practice, this means that personnelists could be out "on the line," working with managers to optimize their human resources instead of being hidden away in the personnel

[24] U.S. Office of Personnel Management, Personnel Systems and Oversight Group, "Strategic Plan for Personnel Automation," April 1992, p. 5.

[25] U.S. Office of Personnel Management, "Federal Civilian Workforce Statistics: Occupations of Federal White-Collar and Blue-Collar Workers," Oct. 31, 1981, and Sept. 30, 1991.

office, pushing papers. As will be discussed later, an increase in their skills would also conceivably improve their efficiency and help them become more responsive. Both of these changes would be more cost-effective than adding more personnelists to the staff.

The Dilemma of Enforcement Versus Service

Orientation of personnel staff toward compliance with the rules, as opposed to serving the managers, was viewed as a problem by almost half of the responding personnelists, and by over two-thirds of the responding managers, as shown in figure 4. These views were also expressed by both groups in the discussions. The fact that so many of the service providers, as well as their customers, held this view is especially significant.

Both groups believed that too many personnelists tend to focus too narrowly and are so concerned with compliance and with adherence to "the system" that they lose sight of the need to accomplish the agency's mission. This belief is often reinforced by personnelists like the ones who told us they were just too busy to provide feedback to the managers on the status of their personnel actions. The managers perceived such personnelists as not customer-oriented.

> **"I learned from a job candidate, not from the personnel office, that my vacancy had been advertised."**
>
> *A manager in a group interview*

A number of managers expressed concern that individual personnelists tend to be found somewhere along a continuum, with those focused on "customer service" at one end and those focused on "enforcement of the rules" at the other. Personnelists at the "enforcement" end of the continuum are perceived as "police" for whom the rules have become paramount. "They use rules to say why things can't be done, rather than how they can be done," according to one manager. Indeed, some personnelists in the discussion groups were vocally adversarial and were prepared "to do battle" with the managers, as if managers were the enemy and the personnel office were the last line of defense.

The willingness of managers to "get around the system" prompted both managers and personnelists to comment that someone needs to police the system. These commenters believed that managers should focus on accomplishing the agency's mission, and should not be expected to scrupulously devote attention to civil service regulations. As one personnelist put it, without strong enforcement by personnel, "Managers would circumvent civil service rules and operate on the basis of cronyism." This concern was genuine, reinforced by anecdotes about managerial abuse and by some managers' belief that the civil service rules are not their responsibility but are "personnel's problem."

Most personnelists whom we interviewed did not see their "enforcer" role negatively, as the managers did. Indeed, the personnelists commented that they had been given the charter of maintaining the integrity of the system and believed they were performing according to the expectations of their agency management. Many of the personnelists were clearly dedicated to the merit system and to their work involved in operating and preserving it. While they essentially shared the views of the managers regarding the complexity of the system, they accepted the system as a given and had no way to challenge it. This difference in perceptions appears to be a major source of disharmony between the managers and their personnelists.

In group interviews, managers noted that some personnelists are at the "customer service" end of the continuum. These same managers were extremely complimentary toward the personnel office; they valued the service highly and had few negative comments. Apparently, the consultative

and advisory role is quite strong in at least some of the personnel offices among our sample agencies.

> **"So much of the success or failure of a personnelist depends on the individual's orientation toward service versus compliance. This in turn depends on the personality and training of each individual and varies widely. There should be some way of training personnel people in a standard curriculum so the range of differences wouldn't be so wide."**
>
> *A personnelist in a group interview*

Many of the personnelists felt torn between conflicting demands. On one hand, they felt strong pressure to help the manager achieve the desired result by "getting around" the system. On the other hand, they felt strong pressure to enforce strict compliance with the rules, often obstructing the desired result. There are conflicting opinions as to which of these alternatives is constructive and which is destructive.

A different kind of compliance activity, documenting and processing, occupies a considerable portion of the personnel staff's time and competes with customer service. This emphasis on maintaining records is driven at least in part by the personnel office evaluation system, as discussed earlier. But it was pejoratively characterized by managers and personnelists alike as paper-pushing. While proper documentation is useful and necessary, it is viewed as not in balance with the need for timely and efficient service to managers.

Good Service: A Matter of Skill?

More than half (56 percent) of managers and almost half (48 percent) of personnelists thought that either "to a large extent" or "to some extent" carrying out their personnel management responsibilities was more difficult than it ought to be because of a lack of sufficient skill among personnelists.

We asked an additional, but related, question of the personnelists: "To what extent do you feel that you know enough and are skilled enough to provide excellent service?" Only one-third of the personnelists responded, "To a very great extent." Some 57 percent responded, "To a small extent; there's a lot I don't know." Nine percent responded, "To no extent; I'm overwhelmed and need a lot more development."

As a further measure of the skill of personnelists, we asked both the managers and the personnelists to describe the quality and accuracy of the finished work products of their personnel offices. Almost a third of the managers, and over a third of the personnelists, gave negative or mixed responses. The extent of negative responses from both groups suggests serious problems. One might be that skill levels among personnelists may not be as high as necessary to provide high-quality service.

Managers have a need for their personnelists to know the theory and practice of human resources management with thoroughness and precision, and to respond swiftly. When personnelists fail, they come under harsh criticism. If both groups in an agency agree there is a need for a better trained personnel staff, then agency leaders can more readily address that need, with help from OPM.

In the view of many of the managers we spoke with, an important factor affecting the quality of personnel service is the lack of a *uniformly* high level of competence among members of the personnel staff. For these managers, success or failure in their dealings with the personnel office is often "the luck of the draw"; i.e., it depends on which personnelist they happen to contact. The sought-after personnelist is one with good knowledge and a helpful attitude.

> **"One way to get results is 'judge shopping'; you wait until the right personnelist is available to get your problem dealt with."**
>
> *A manager in a group interview*

In the discussions regarding skills of personnelists, there was considerable interest in, and conflicting comments about, the quality of the leadership provided by personnel officers and other supervisory personnelists. Some managers tended to believe that the main reason for deficiencies in the performance of the personnel office was the lack of good quality leadership. In their view, some personnel officers failed to impart the desired values to their staff, who then developed attitudes and behaviors that were unresponsive to the needs of the agency managers.

Other managers reported that their personnel officers were very mission-oriented and were providing strong leadership to their personnelists. These same managers were very positive about the effectiveness of their personnel offices and their delivery of service. Personnel officers lent some support to managers' position that leadership makes the difference, by attributing the effectiveness of their best personnelist teams to superior leadership by those teams' supervisors.

Personnel officers we interviewed agreed that they need to develop the desired values and communicate them to their staffs. As an example, a personnel officer who directed a staff considered highly effective regularly conducted customer surveys and critically evaluated the personnelists' delivery of service as a part of their annual performance appraisals. One top manager recommended expanding this process to allow participation by managers, who would have input into performance appraisals for the personnelists providing them service.

A Look at Formal Education. A number of managers expressed concern, in individual interviews and group discussions, that many personnel specialists with whom they had worked were not as capable as they needed to be because they lacked adequate career development training or some type of formal preparation such as that gained through a college education. More specifically, these managers suggested that too many personnel specialists had "come up through the ranks"; i.e., through promotion to "professional" personnel specialist positions from personnel assistant or related clerical positions without sufficient preparation.

The view of these managers was that all personnel specialists should bring to the job the skills acquired through college education. In this study, we made no attempt to learn whether personnel specialists are either comparatively or specifically undereducated or that college graduates perform better in these positions than noncollege graduates. In fact, there are many personnel specialists who do not have college degrees who perform very well. Still, there were a significant number of managers who, dissatisfied with the quality of the work performed by their personnel offices, believed that the quality would improve if the Government required personnel specialists to have college degrees. Currently, it does not.

Along with its determinations regarding other administrative occupational groups like budget analysts and procurement specialists, OPM has determined that a college degree is not required to perform personnel work. A person holding a bachelor's degree but without work experience currently can qualify for entry into Federal personnel "professional" positions at grade GS-5. But 3 years of "general" work experience, which includes at least 1 year of personnel work experience at a level equivalent to GS-4, is also qualifying for grade GS-5, according to the Qualification Standards published by OPM. This makes it possible for a person without college to start as a clerk in a personnel office and eventually to advance to a

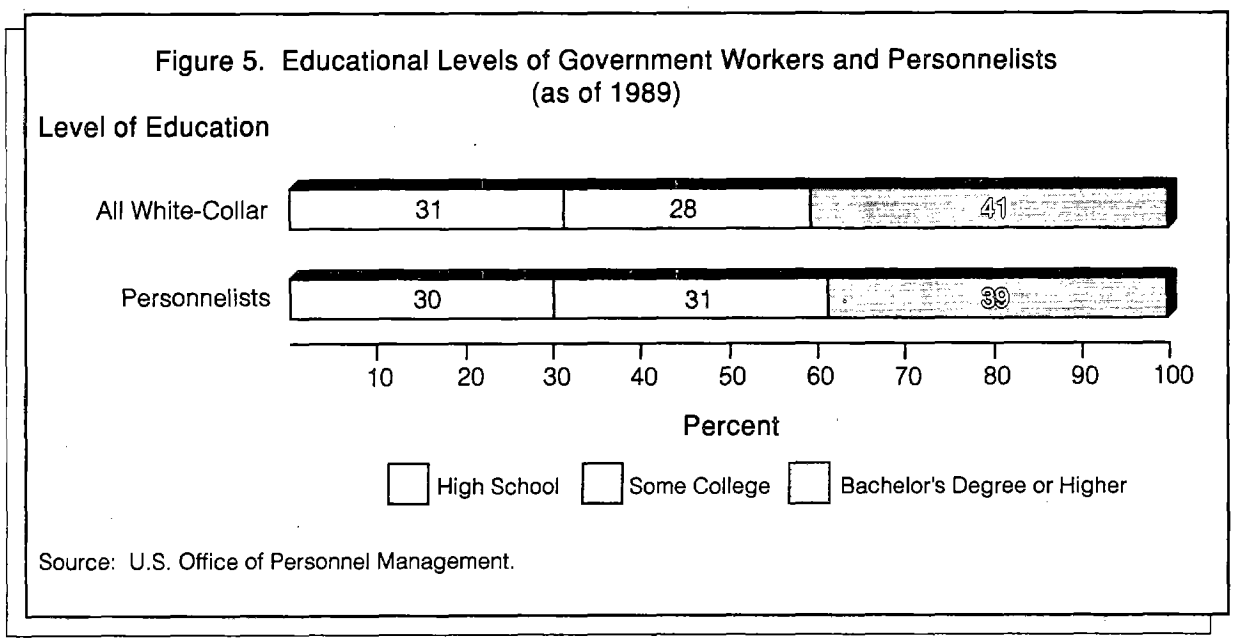
"professional" personnel position. In fact, many have done so, as indicated in figure 5, and agencies are to be commended for their achievements in providing the opportunity for upward mobility for many personnelists. The use of upward mobility programs, however, carries with it the responsibility for appropriate selection and adequate training of the participants.

In explaining their observations about college graduates versus nongraduates, many managers we spoke with indicated that they prefer a personnelist who is "broad gauge"—i.e., has a broad perspective and can "see the big picture"—rather than a technical specialist who is not attuned to the larger needs of the organization, unable to see the relationship between personnel management and mission accomplishment.

In addition to the issue of college education, some managers raised a related issue of major fields of study. Of the personnel specialists we contacted for this study who hold a bachelor's degree or higher, most had been business or liberal arts majors. This is at least partly consistent with the pattern in the private sector, where most new entrants in the field of human resource management are business graduates.[26]

A few managers complained that personnel specialists typically do not understand technical programs unless they have been engineering or science majors. However, scientists and engineers don't often seek jobs in human resources management. Consequently, more aggressive training of nontechnical personnelists in the technical programs of their agencies may be needed to assure responsive service. Alternatively, technical specialists in program areas may need to assume a larger share of the personnel work, as has been demonstrated in agencies such as the Department of the Air Force.

A Look at Inservice Training and Career Development. In our questionnaire, we sought to identify the training which personnelists have received and their training needs which they believe are yet unfulfilled. We asked the personnelists to list the Government-sponsored training courses (classroom or on-the-job training) they had completed in the last 5 years. Only 1 out of 5 had attended 5 or more, averaging at least 1 training course per year;



[26] Thomas J. Bergmann and M. John Close, "Entry-Level Requirements for HR Professionals," Personnel Journal, June 1987, p. 125.

two-thirds had completed 2 to 4 courses over the 5-year period; and 1 out of 10 had completed 1 course or none at all.

Given the large amount of material, and frequent additions or changes, that personnelists are expected to know in order to provide competent advice and service, these data indicate what seems like a rather low level of commitment to training. One possible reason came from the personnelists who cited their lack of opportunity to take training courses because of the press of business—a common complaint.

> **"We're so understaffed that we can't get away to take training. There just isn't anybody to handle the work while you're gone, so we aren't developing at all."**
>
> *A personnelist in a group interview*

Also, money is often not available to pay for training or associated travel costs—another common complaint of personnelists. Another possible explanation is the absence of clear direction, vision, or motivation to guide personnelists' further training and development, an absence resulting from what many personnelists and managers described as the "firefighting" nature of personnel work.

With respect to the perceived need for broader perspective among personnelists, we didn't see any particular efforts to fill that need in our sample of agencies. On the contrary, we encountered a pervasive climate that discouraged such efforts. In addition to the obstacles to training discussed above (tight training budgets, shortage of time, and lack of direction), another cause mentioned in our personnelists' group discussions was the limitation in the law which authorizes the Government to pay for training. While there are exceptions and room for interpretation, the law requires training to be "directly related to the performance by the employee of official duties."[27] For all of these reasons, many personnelists perceived that their training is restricted to skills essential for the job at hand. They are thus precluded from development activities that would provide a broader perspective. While OPM regulations permit agencies to exercise significant discretion in deciding what training is related to official duties, it is possible that some agencies' internal training policies are more restrictive than law or regulation requires.

Rotational assignments, another type of developmental experience, were often suggested by both managers and personnelists in our interviews. Examples are temporary assignments of personnelists to different jobs in program organizations, and the assignment of managers into the personnel office. These managers are said to "bring to personnel the knowledge, language, and requirements of the line * * * [and] improve immeasurably the communication links * * *."[28] Likewise, personnel specialists who rotate through a line job can increase their ability to understand and deal with the organization as a whole.[29] Such interchanges could help replace the adversarial relationship that often exists between the personnel staff and the managers with a more cooperative and effective relationship. Such interchanges are currently being pilot tested by the President's Council for Management Improvement. However, the personnelists in our study who were especially enthusiastic about the concept of rotational assignments were not optimistic that they could get away from the personnel office for the extended period that would be required.

Some personnel offices we visited were operating on the "generalist" concept; i.e., their personnelists were covering two or more specialties like classification and recruiting. Learning an additional specialty or two would certainly have the effect of broadening the perspective of a personnelist. Managers very much liked the "one stop shop-

[27] 5 U.S.C. 4101(4), September 1991.

[28] Fred K. Foulkes and Henry M. Morgan, "Organizing and Staffing the Personnel Function," Harvard Business Review, May-June 1977, p. 152.

[29] Ibid., p. 153.

ping" they experienced with the generalists, but some complained that the generalists lacked the depth of knowledge the managers desired. Likewise, some generalists complained that they were burning out because of the added responsibility and the demand for additional technical skills.

Some managers suggested that a way to assure strong capability among personnel specialists was to adopt a formal accreditation process analogous to that used for Certified Public Accountants.[30] While there are many practical obstacles that would have to be overcome before such a suggestion could be implemented, the suggestion itself illustrates the frustration some managers have with uneven skills and capabilities among personnel professionals.

It is a matter of concern that many managers and some personnelists believe that personnelists do not possess adequate skills to deliver fast, effective service. As discussed earlier, much of the reason begins with a very complex and difficult system that has been given to personnelists to learn and use—a daunting task for anyone. While attention should not be distracted from improving the system, the skills of the personnelists need scrutiny and augmentation. In their efforts to build a highly skilled personnel staff for the future, OPM and agency leaders may need to consider:

- Encouraging more ongoing development and technical training for all personnelists, with emphasis on mission-related subjects and service orientation;
- Encouraging "broad gauge" career development of personnelists without a college background, as a necessary companion to an aggressive upward mobility program for personnelists;
- Achieving greater balance in the recruiting sources used for entry-level personnel specialist positions by hiring more individuals from outside Government;
- Developing a more effective method of assessing the potential for growth in internal candidates in order to select the best; and
- Finding ways to achieve more consistently effective leadership provided to personnelists.

The Manager's Capability: A Critical Factor

There is more to successful delivery of personnel service than the four factors discussed in this section. Managers also play a key role, in partnership with personnelists, in determining the quality of the personnel service they receive. To carry out their role effectively, managers need to have good supervisory skills and sufficient decisionmaking authority delegated to them. In our survey, we asked managers about training they had received before and after becoming supervisors, and about personnel authority they believed had been given to them.

> **"* * * [P]ersonnel programs succeed because line managers make them succeed."**
>
> *Fred K. Foulkes and Henry M. Morgan*[31]

We first asked managers to what extent they had been trained to become supervisors prior to their first supervisory position. In response:

- One third (33 percent) said they had not been prepared to any extent,
- Half (53 percent) said they had been prepared to some extent, and
- One in eight (13 percent) said they had been prepared to a great extent.

This level of preparation appears modest, considering that many individuals are selected for supervi-

[30] William J. Traynor, "Opportunities in Personnel Management," VGM Career Horizons, Lincolnwood, IL, 1983, pp. 90-91.
[31] Foulkes and Morgan, op. cit., p. 143.

sory jobs largely on the basis of their technical subject-matter expertise. But, as noted in a recent MSPB report, "A system that relies primarily on an assessment of technical capability in the work to be supervised will, in most cases, be inadequate."[32]

We then asked managers to what extent supervisory training was provided after they had been assigned to their first supervisory job. Most (82 percent) responded, "To a large extent" or "To some extent." Over 18 percent, almost one in five, responded, "To a small extent" or "None at all." While the 82-percent positive response was fairly impressive, it conflicts with personnelists' and managers' comments in group discussions that managers need still more development in order to effectively manage their employees. Both groups commented that those managers who were not knowledgeable about the personnel system were typically the same ones who had the most trouble achieving satisfactory results from their personnel offices.

> **"I think the system is not to blame for most of our troubles with the personnel office. Most of the time, we do it to ourselves."**
>
> *A manager in a group interview*

Following entry into their first supervisory positions, managers may then work for years with little training other than on-the-job practice. Most neglected, according to the managers we interviewed, was training in personal skills such as interviewing, counseling, team building, managing performance, communicating, and dealing effectively with problem employees. Instead, their agencies' training efforts emphasized personnel rules, systems, and administration—training they resisted the most. Personnelists also commented that it is difficult to get managers interested in attending training in matters related to personnel.

> **"We don't teach managers personnel and don't evaluate their performance as personnel managers. And the personnel system we have was not designed to make personnel managers out of the supervisors."**
>
> *A top manager*

This perceived shortfall in supervisory development of managers seems like a substantial omission in a system which appears to be moving toward ever-increasing delegation of personnel authority and responsibility to its managers. However, the need for supervisory training must be balanced against the need for managers to take responsibility for managing their employees. As shown in figure 6, when we asked managers what personnel authorities they had, they reported astonishingly few, when in actuality they had many.

A principal role of the manager is to lead, organize, motivate, and develop employees. But in the responses to our survey and in the discussions, there was not much agreement or clarity about the managers' role. For example, when 32 percent of managers responded that they did not have the authority to initiate a personnel action, a question arises as to whether such managers should even be classed (and paid) as supervisors. A number of managers commented that supervision was little more than administering their subordinates' time and attendance records and reviewing their work products. A vocal minority of the managers were very supportive of the system's restrictions, found comfort in the limits to their authority, and resisted the idea of increases in their responsibility.

In contrast, other managers were personally offended by the limits to their authority, which they interpreted as a lack of trust in them to make good personnel decisions. In their view, this lack

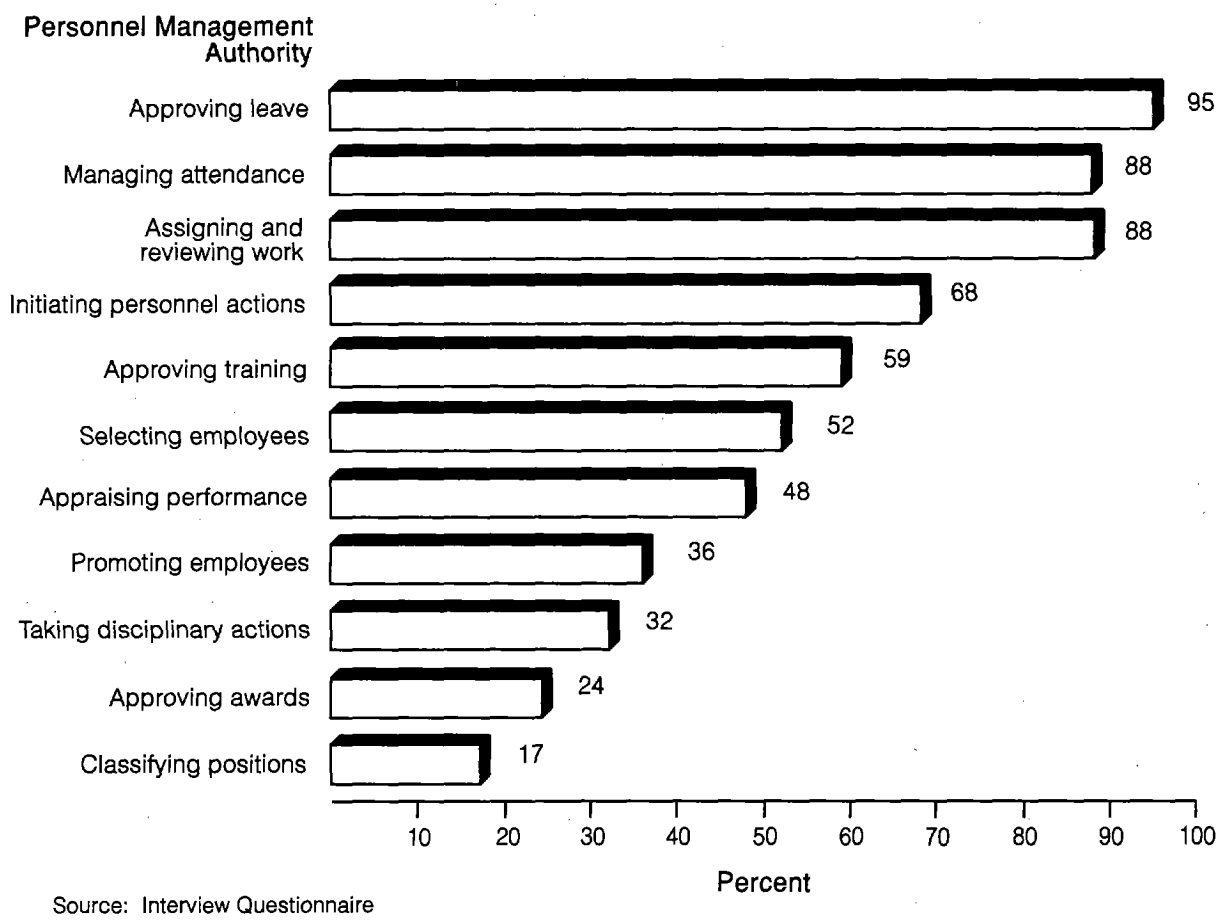
[32] U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "Federal First-Line Supervisors: How Good Are They?," March 1992, p. 3.

of trust is why the laws and regulations prescribe their actions in excruciating detail, and why most of their decisions are reviewed at a higher level. The majority of these managers would like to have more authority and freedom to manage, and would like to have the concomitant increase in accountability.

These conflicting views of managers regarding their responsibilities (discussed also in a 1992 OPM report[33]) suggest that agency leaders need to focus more attention on training in personnel management for their managers. In concert with examining training needs of managers, agency leaders also need to examine delegations of authority to ensure that managerial skills and managerial authority are appropriate and congruent.

Another issue deserves mention here. Although not directly related to the issues of skill levels and delegations of authority of managers, it is very much related to the issue of delivery of personnel service to managers. In the group discussions, managers observed that the quality and timeliness of personnel office services often depended on the personal power (i.e., the organizational level) of the

Figure 6. Percent of Managers Agreeing That They Have Selected Personnel Management Authorities



Source: Interview Questionnaire

[33] U.S. Office of Personnel Management, "Delegation of Personnel Management Authority: OPM Governmentwide Review," January 1992, p. 29.

manager requesting service. In this view, a top-level manager usually has enough power or influence to achieve the desired results quickly, even if some variation to the standard procedures or requirements is necessary. In individual interviews, top managers agreed. One comment was typical: "I don't have any problem with the personnel office; I get everything I ask for, and I get it the next day."

Some lower level managers alleged that personnelists apply the rules selectively, and they cited personnelists' use of double standards as part of the difficulty in obtaining good-quality service. Some personnelists were very vocal about this, saying they were pressured to break the rules in special cases, usually involving the exercise of power by high-level managers. In such cases, their efforts were then directed toward expert manipulation of the documentation (instead of toward effective human resources management) so that the record would not reflect an inappropriate personnel action when auditors came to check.

In cases not involving breaking the rules, some managers viewed personnelists as coming up with very creative (and legal) solutions to managers' problems in situations where high-level management has taken an interest. But lower level managers commented that they lose out when in competition with top management for the attention of the personnel office. Managers also commented that the typical personnel officer will devote the most talented and skilled personnelists to handling the "front office," so other offices get what's left.

The result was that managers at the top of the agency were receiving fast, responsive, high-quality service from the personnel office, but other managers of lesser rank received service of a lesser quality. Raising the standard for personnel service to a uniformly high level for all managers would seem to be an urgent need.

> **"We're so busy spoon-feeding the top managers that we can't possibly provide good service to the line managers."**
>
> *A personnelist in a group interview*

In summary, managers and personnelists agreed on a variety of problems in delivery of personnel service to managers. Reducing the complexity of the system is largely the responsibility of Congress and OPM, although agency leaders share at least part of that responsibility where they have "over-regulated" the system internally. Problems with the skills of personnelists and the skills of managers are within the province of agency leaders, with assistance from OPM. Correcting differences in the quality of personnel service based on the relative power of managers is also the responsibility of agency heads. Efforts to make improvements in these challenging areas will be essential if the Federal civil service system is to have the improved human resources management and mission accomplishment needed to meet the demands of the 1990's and the 21st century.

CONCLUSIONS

Federal personnel offices and their staffs are assigned a key role in the management of the Government's human resources. One of their primary responsibilities is the operation of the rather massive administrative machinery that is intended to support and further the worthwhile objectives of the Government's merit-based civil service system. Unfortunately, although the Government has made a substantial resource investment in the operation of its personnel offices, Federal managers in our study tended to believe that much of the work done by their personnel office has little to do with getting the mission of the agency accomplished in a timely, efficient, and effective manner.

The fact is, the personnel office has a variety of jobs to do and a number of constituencies to serve. For example, personnel actions that affect pay and benefits must be processed within tight time cycles in order to assure reliable, timely, and accurate paychecks for employees. Agency leaders, OPM, the Office of Management and Budget, and Congress require many reports of personnel activities. A manager requesting help must compete with other managers as well as employees and others for the attention of the personnel staff. Under constant pressure, most Federal personnel offices ably fulfill many of their assigned functions. However, not all personnel work is viewed as necessary or of visible benefit to the serviced organization. In addition, for a variety of reasons, some of the necessary functions assigned to personnel offices are too often simply not done well.

The division of labor between personnel offices and managers and the overlapping personnel management responsibilities of each need clarification. Managers are not generally attracted to personnel management training programs geared to their day-to-day needs, nor are they encouraged to attend such training.

Increasing the number of personnelists is not a viable solution in times of cutting costs, especially administrative costs. But increasing the skill levels of the present personnel workforce is not only achievable but essential. Also, talented and enterprising personnelists will require changes in their work environment to allow them greater discretion and to relieve them of the almost overwhelming administrative processes that currently drain their energies.

Managers and personnelists in our study agreed that there must be rules to maintain a merit system. They also agreed that the present system has become so voluminous and prescriptive that it has taken on a life of its own. It is this gap between basic, necessary rules of merit and the burdensome present-day system that has put many personnelists in a daily conflict between serving the system and serving the customers.

Many of the current systems, including some of the present approaches to competitive examining and promotion and the position classification system, were conceived at a different time, in circumstances drastically different from those of the present, using assumptions that should be retested under contemporary light. And a few agencies are doing just that.[34] James B. King, Director of OPM, alluded to the need for sweeping change when he said:

[34] U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "Federal Personnel Research Programs and Demonstration Projects: Catalysts for Change," December 1992, p. 9. This study reported that six agencies (Navy, Air Force, Defense Logistics Agency, Agriculture, Federal Aviation Administration, and National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST)) were granted permission by OPM to test innovative approaches to recruitment and selection under the demonstration project authority of the CSRA. Navy and NIST are also testing a simplified classification system.

CONCLUSIONS

> Our major challenge will be to equip federal workers and managers to meet the President's and the public's expectations for the coming years * * * by reducing bureaucracy and creating a workplace that combines flexibility in procedure with accountability for results.[35]

This study revealed that delegating more personnel authority to managers has met with limited success. In many cases, the delegations appeared to be in name only; managers believed that final decisions were still reserved for higher level management. Perhaps more limiting was the belief of many managers that greater delegation of authority simply meant that managers must now contend with the resulting burdensome paperwork without any real increase in their managerial discretion. In other words, many managers saw little benefit in taking on a greater role in the operation of the personnel system unless the system is smaller, more flexible, and more rational.

However, even in situations where greater delegations of authority were seen as potentially useful, some managers saw the personnel office as reluctant to give up or share personnel authorities, because the office doesn't trust managers or because it wants to guard its own turf. This finding was consistent with the Board's report of its 1988 Governmentwide survey of personnel offices, "Federal Personnel Management Since Civil Service Reform," which found that " * * * not all personnel specialists see these delegations as a positive change."[36]

In some occupations, the Government may not be competitive in the race for high-quality employees, because it does not address the needs of job candidates. This includes designing user-friendly forms and processes, and training recruiters to provide attentive and responsive service to job applicants. This is especially true for highly skilled and specialized people—a part of the Federal workforce which is predicted to grow substantially in the foreseeable future.[37]

To overcome the built-in resistance to change and to improve the overall effectiveness of the Federal personnel office will not be easy, but the potential benefits are well worth the endeavor. The value and need for such an initiative were highlighted in the announcement by the President on March 3, 1993, of a 6-month "National Performance Review" which identified "civil service policies and reform" and "reducing red tape (internal barriers)" as major areas of emphasis that cross department and agency lines. The following recommendations should prove helpful to those efforts.

[35] James B. King, from his statement in his confirmation hearing before the Committee on Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate, Mar. 30, 1993.

[36] U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "Federal Personnel Management Since Civil Service Reform: A Survey of Federal Personnel Officials," November 1989, p. 10.

[37] Ibid., p. 8.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **OPM and Congress should give higher priority to efforts to reduce the scope and volume of Federal personnel laws, regulations, and procedures, but in conjunction with agency and OPM efforts to increase managers' and supervisors' involvement in personnel management, and the personnelists' capability and competency.** One of the goals established by the Office of Personnel Management in its "Strategic Plan for Federal Human Resources Management" is "movement away from central operations, regulation, and standardized processes * * * toward optimal delegation of authorities and operating responsibilities to agencies as well as deregulation of required processes." Processes intended to constrain and control managers should be replaced with simple, broad, policy guidelines for which managers are held accountable in a spirit of integrity and fairness.

2. **Agency heads should provide the necessary leadership for: (a) reducing their agencies' internal personnel policies and procedures to a smaller and more manageable size, (b) delegating greater personnel authority, discretion, and accountability to their managers, and (c) including their top personnel officials in major policy decisions.** The gradual reduction of detailed regulations and procedures which limit managerial decisionmaking must be counterbalanced by an environment of honesty and integrity in which managers and supervisors are held accountable for good faith adherence to more general personnel management guidelines and articulated bottom-line results in the human resources area.

3. **In revamping the Federal personnel system, OPM and the agencies should aim to preserve the essential elements of the merit system and centralized record keeping and tracking, while increasing agency and managerial discretion.** Even under a simplified Federal personnel system, a core of Governmentwide regulations or guidelines will be needed to ensure fairness and equity, and to provide information for meaningful centralized record keeping and accounting purposes. The goal, therefore, is not to eliminate all regulatory requirements but rather to reduce the requirements and the administrative burdens imposed to the minimum necessary. To this end, greater automation of some personnel processes (e.g., position classification, performance management, and the ranking and referral of job candidates) may be possible. Care should be exercised, however, to ensure that a process is not being retained because it can be automated, but rather because it serves a legitimate need.

4. **OPM and the agencies should reorient their programs for evaluation of the effectiveness of personnel management, to focus on managerial adherence to personnel policies, guidelines and objectives, and on the personnel office's ability to provide service to its various customers and to contribute to the agency mission.** Compliance with personnel regulations and procedures should remain an important element of efforts to evaluate personnel offices. But managers must also be held accountable for the statutory and regulatory correctness of their personnel management decisions. Further, evaluation should

also focus on whether the regulations and procedures themselves are accomplishing their intended objectives.

5. **OPM and the agencies should examine the various and sometimes conflicting roles assigned to the Federal personnel office to assure they are as compatible as possible by focusing on the contribution each makes (or should make) to the effective and efficient accomplishment of agency mission within the context of a merit-based civil service system.** Personnel offices and personnelists are required to assure regulatory and procedural compliance while also providing advice and assistance to managers—roles that many believe are incompatible. The first requirement, which can cause personnelists to be seen as adversaries, can interfere with the latter, which requires a collaborative relationship. The potential for conflict can be minimized by assuring: (a) that the personnel regulations, procedures, and administrative controls are the minimum necessary to achieve the desired result, and (b) that personnelists are sensitive to the mission of the agency and capable of helping managers to manage effectively in the spirit of the merit system.

6. **Federal agencies and OPM should reexamine current screening and selection methods to assure their future personnel officers and specialists are of high quality and are well matched to the demands placed on the personnel office as it evolves.** A major Governmentwide reexamination of the specific skills, knowledges, abilities, and other characteristics needed by a successful personnelist in today's environment appears to be overdue. Such a reexamination should be a collaborative effort on the part of OPM and the agencies, and the results should be used in making any modifications to current method of screening and selecting personnelists.

7. **Agency leaders should ensure that personnel offices have in place comprehensive development plans, properly funded, and that personnel officers and staff follow the plans. The objective is to ensure that future personnel staffs are highly skilled, maintain a comprehensive perspective, and are service-oriented.** Such development should include learning about the specific missions and jobs of the organizations they serve, perhaps through temporary work assignments in mission-related programs. Such assignments should include experience in planning and achieving legitimate organizational goals within personnel law and procedures.

8. **Federal agencies, with OPM assistance, should provide additional training and orientation for their managers in the effective and responsible exercise of their personnel authority, especially as the requirements of the Federal personnel system are reduced to a more manageable size, and as Federal managers are given more authority and responsibility for operation of the system.** Such training and orientation might take the form of more substantive involvement in some personnel office activities, such as the drafting of agency personnel policies and guidelines, assisting in agency personnel management evaluation reviews, or temporary assignments to the personnel office. The objectives should be greater ownership of the merit-based Federal personnel system on the part of managers and higher levels of managerial skill.

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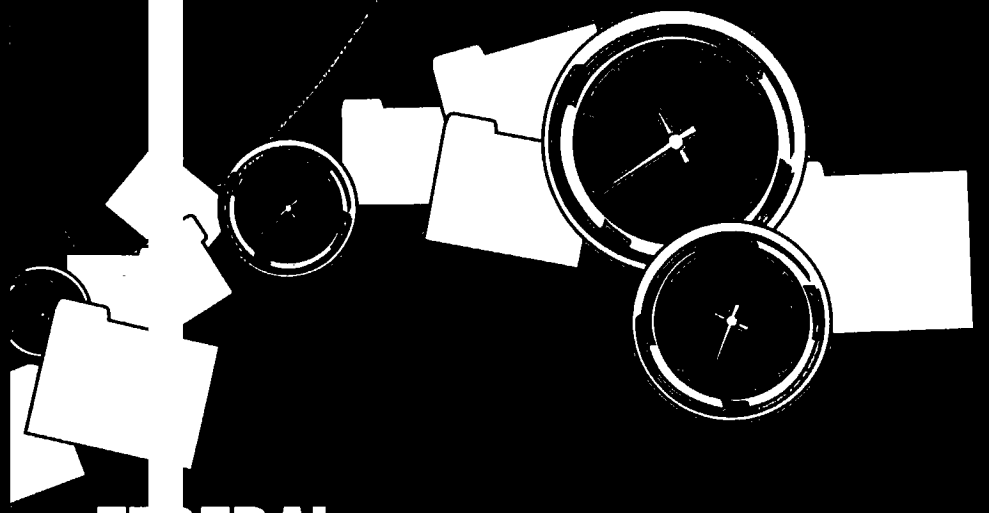
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