

# WORKING FOR AMERICA: An Update



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

July 1994

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# Executive Summary

*Federal policymakers and managers can manage better when they have accurate and current knowledge about the attitudes, opinions, and views of the people responsible for implementing their policies and programs. This is particularly the case as policymakers and managers begin to respond to the challenge and recommendations of the National Performance Review to “reinvent” Government. To help provide useful information, the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) surveyed a representative cross-section of the Government’s 1.7 million full-time, permanent civilian employees. Specifically, in MSPB’s fourth Merit Principles Survey since 1983, we asked employees about their work, pay, supervisors, and organization; the quality of their coworkers; the extent to which they feel treated fairly; the frequency with which they experience discrimination, retaliation for whistleblowing, or other prohibited personnel practices; and other issues. In addition, we asked supervisors about their experiences in dealing with subordinates with performance or conduct problems and the quality of job applicants.*

*This report details some of the more significant responses of the 13,432 employees who completed the survey in late 1992. The survey results suggest that the U.S. civil service system generally is healthy but needs improvements in a number of areas. While the cutbacks in defense resulting from the end of the Cold War and the Nation’s slow economic growth appear to be providing the Government with ample supplies of qualified workers, the changing structure and demographics of the workforce present some significant challenges. This study examines some of the strengths and weaknesses of the civil service system in this time of transition and offers some suggestions for improvements.*

## Findings

- ❑ **Employees and supervisors believe that Federal workforce quality is improving slightly.** While the percentages of employees who rate coworkers average or above average in quality changed only from 53 percent in 1989 to 56 percent in 1992, the percentages of supervisors reporting improvement in the quality of job applicants increased substantially across a wide range of job types and grade levels.
- ❑ **Many Federal employees do not feel they are treated fairly.** Fewer than half of Federal employees in 1992 felt treated fairly when it comes to *job assignments* (45 percent), *awards* (37 percent), *training* (36 percent), and *promotions* (34 percent). Generally, minority group members felt they are treated less fairly than nonminority group members; however, this belief also varied with the gender of the employee.

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- ❑ **A significant percentage of Federal employees believe they are the victims of discrimination or other prohibited personnel practices.** One of five employees (19 percent) believed they were denied a job or promotion in the last 2 years because another applicant was given an unlawful advantage. About one in nine employees said they experienced discrimination based on race (12 percent), gender (12 percent), or age (10 percent). Not infrequently, members of some gender, minority/nonminority, or age group reported rates of discrimination or prohibited personnel practices well above the average.
- ❑ **Many Federal employees believe that affirmative action considerations have a place in the hiring process, but many others do not.** While 52 percent of women and 69 percent of minority group members (including men and women) agreed that affirmative action considerations should be taken into account when choosing among highly-qualified candidates, fewer than half (44 percent) of all Government employees agreed. And, about one-third (33 percent) disagreed. While just 31 percent of nonminority male employees supported the Government's affirmative action policy, the policy was supported by nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of the SES.
- ❑ **Federal employees in 1992 were more willing to report illegal or wasteful activities than in 1983, even though the percentage of employees who experienced reprisal for their reporting increased.** While the percentage of observed instances of illegal or wasteful activity decreased from 23 percent in 1983 to 18 percent in 1992, the percentage of employees willing to report the activity increased sharply from 30 percent to 50 percent. Unfortunately, 37 percent of those who reported an illegal or wasteful activity in 1992 said they experienced or were threatened with some sort of reprisal as a result—up from 24 percent in 1983.
- ❑ **The image of the Government as an employer had improved significantly since 1989.** From 1989 to 1992, the percentage of employees who would recommend the Government as a place to work increased from 49 to 67 percent. Changes in the Nation's economy, the scarcity of job opportunities both inside and outside Government, and implementation of various programs to improve the quality of working life for Government employees may be reasons for this increase.
- ❑ **Overall job satisfaction among Federal employees continued to be high even among employees who expected to be affected by a reduction-in-force.** In 1992, 72 percent of Federal employees said they were satisfied with their jobs, compared to 59 percent in 1983, 68 percent in 1986, and 70 percent in 1989. Significant increases in job satisfaction in some executive branch agencies have reduced the differences between agencies in levels of employee job satisfaction. Contrary to conventional wisdom, employees who said they would be affected by a reduction-in-force were only slightly less satisfied with their jobs than employees who would not be affected by such a reduction.
- ❑ **Members of the Senior Executive Service (SES) are by far the most satisfied employee group.** They are satisfied with virtually every aspect of their jobs. Some 81 percent said they were satisfied with their pay, possibly reflecting the 1991 increase in SES compensation. Only 14 percent said that they plan to look for another job outside Government in the next year. Barring large numbers of retirements or other factors, members of the SES are not expected to be leaving the Government in large numbers.

- ❑ **Over half (55 percent) of Federal supervisors have had to deal with employees with problem behaviors in the last 2 years.** Counseling employees informally was the most frequent action (89 percent) taken to deal with a problem behavior. That action was judged to have made things better in 58 percent of the poor performance cases and in 57 percent of the misconduct cases.
- ❑ **Employees rate their organizations as less than satisfactory on several important factors.** Fewer than half (47 percent) of employees said their organization does a good job communicating its policies and procedures; 50 percent said they share the values of their organization; and only 41 percent said their organization inspires them to do well. While 43 percent said their unit has enough people to accomplish its mission, 48 percent said it does not.

## Recommendations

The 1992 Merit Principles Survey findings will be useful for decisionmakers dealing with a range of issues currently affecting the Nation's civil service. The findings should also be useful at this time as managers and policymakers address the recommendations of the Vice President's National Performance Review (NPR). Based on the survey findings, we offer the following recommendations:

- ❑ **Managers need to take strong initiatives to identify the origins of perceptions of prohibited personnel practices and to take appropriate steps for their removal.** While many employees believe they have been treated fairly, many others believe they have not been treated fairly. Unless these perceptions are forcibly addressed, they will undermine the morale of the work unit and the quality of service it provides.
- ❑ **Agencies should promote organizational changes and programs that permit employees and managers alike to identify and resolve problems in a non-threatening manner.** When all members of the organization value the disclosure of problems, there is less likelihood that those reporting the problems will be retaliated against. Agencies should create non-threatening environments that will encourage employees to share information about problems in a constructive manner. Employee involvement programs, open door policies, employee surveys, labor-management partnerships, hotlines, and similar initiatives tailored to the needs of each agency may be useful in creating such an environment. Agencies should also take strong steps and punish those who are found to have taken reprisal actions against employees making legitimate disclosures.
- ❑ **For job vacancies that will continue to occur, managers are encouraged to take advantage of the current surplus labor market by hiring and retaining high-quality candidates.** Managers are encouraged to use those hiring authorities and selection tools that will best meet not only the immediate needs of the organization but also its long-range needs.
- ❑ **Consistent with the directives of the NPR, policymakers and managers need to regularly review their organization's mission and workload to ensure that there are sufficient numbers of trained people to do the work and that available personnel are used efficiently and effectively.** When only 43 percent of the employees report that their work unit has enough people to accomplish its mission, it is time to examine more closely the mission as well as the way the work is being performed. Workforce planning needs to ensure that mission-essential work is clearly identified and that non-essential tasks are eliminated to permit the staff to do what is really needed. Simultaneously, managers need to identify and reengineer work tasks that are excessively routine, duplicative, and repetitive and that undermine the well-being and productivity of the Federal workforce.

- ❑ **Managers and supervisors need to take a more active role in dealing with employees with problem behaviors.** Employees continue to report frustration and dissatisfaction with coworkers who do not do their fair share of the work. Managers are encouraged to renew their efforts to make greater use of available remedies for dealing with employees with problem behaviors, while policymakers design improved procedures for dealing with these employees. We urge human resource specialists to work more closely with employees and supervisors in work units where there are problem behaviors, to help reach effective and fair solutions.
- ❑ **Federal managers should take into account the level of their employees' job satisfaction in their attempts to improve the work environment.** As organizations undergo dramatic changes, it is important to ensure that levels of job satisfaction remain high. Job satisfaction helps reduce costly employee absenteeism and unwanted turnover and is related to a wide variety of organizational objectives, including increased productivity. In particular, managers should take extra care that personnel decisions that might adversely affect employee job satisfaction are fair and that all personnel management actions taken are fully and accurately understood by all employees, especially those most affected by them.
- ❑ **Agency managers should closely monitor plans of senior executives to leave the Government in 1994.** Although few SES members said they plan to look for another job, many more may decide to leave the Government by retiring. While a significant number of SES members are eligible to retire, the actual number who retire is expected to be relatively low. Buyouts, possible changes in retirement benefits, the 1994 locality pay raise, as well as organizational changes can dramatically affect retirement rates.

# Introduction and Background

Few programs can be managed effectively and efficiently without an ongoing assessment and evaluation of these programs and the individuals responsible for implementing them. Consequently, Federal policymakers and managers can benefit from knowing more about the attitudes, opinions, and views of the Government's workforce. In part, to help provide for such information, the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 (CSRA) charged the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB or the Board) to "conduct special studies relating to the civil service and to report \* \* \* whether or not the public interest in a civil service free from prohibited practices is being adequately protected."<sup>1</sup> This is particularly relevant at this time of change when Federal managers and policymakers, responding to the challenges of the National Performance Review (NPR),<sup>2</sup> are reexamining and reinventing what they do and how they do it.

To help fulfill the Board's statutory responsibility and to provide policymakers and managers with accurate and current information about the views of Federal civilian employees, the Board regularly surveys the attitudes and opinions of the Federal workforce. As part of its ongoing survey program, the Board administers the Merit Principles Survey (MPS) every three years. This survey gathers information about a wide variety of Federal personnel management issues, including workforce quality, incidences of prohibited personnel practices, quality of supervision, training, workload, and working

conditions—all questions whose answers are relevant to effective workforce management.

The information obtained from the Board's surveys is designed to contribute to an ongoing assessment of the condition and "health" of the civil service system and to provide agency managers with baseline data against which to assess their own organizations. The information identifies Governmentwide trends, highlights major differences in the views held by members of various employee groups, and helps pinpoint personnel management areas needing more attention and further improvement.

In the present report we discuss the key findings from the 1992 MPS. The MPS was administered to a random sample of 20,851 employees and 13,432 employees responded with completed questionnaires (for a 64-percent response rate). Since the survey was administered at the end of 1992, the findings provide timely baseline data for use in the reinvention of Government resulting from the Vice President's National Performance Review. Appendix A includes a facsimile of the 1992 MPS.

Some findings from the 1992 MPS will only be summarized in this report, since they are or will be included in more detail in other MSPB reports. Since this is the fourth time the Board has conducted the MPS and since many of the questions are identical or similar on the four surveys, we are able to compare some results over time and identify

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<sup>1</sup> 5 U.S.C. 1205(3). (Public Law 95-454, Oct. 13, 1978.)

<sup>2</sup> National Performance Review, "Creating a Government that Works Better & Costs Less," Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, September 1993.

## Introduction and Background

trends. Previous merit principles surveys were conducted in 1983,<sup>3</sup> 1986,<sup>4</sup> and 1989.<sup>5</sup>

While attitude and opinion surveys have been around for a long time, recent years have seen a dramatic increase in their use. Forward-thinking organizations in both the public and private sectors are increasingly using surveys as proactive tools for supporting the implementation of human resource strategies. Moreover, they are recognizing that the most important part of the survey process is what happens after the results are in—that is, what management *does* with the information.<sup>6</sup> This is as true for Federal policymakers and managers as it is for private sector managers who use surveys.

*There is currently a widespread perception that all Federal employees are lazy, underworked, and overpaid, when in fact nothing could be further from the truth.*

A Survey Respondent

The results of the 1992 MPS must be interpreted within a context in which Federal employees are being challenged to do more with less and are increasingly facing the prospect of doing less with less. Moreover, the end of the Cold War, the problems of the national debt, recommendations of the NPR, and other factors have combined to put tremendous pressures on the Federal workforce to downsize, reorganize, redefine priorities, and increase productivity. Evidence of these pressures is found in the proliferation of programs or processes with “change,” “reinvention,” or “reengineering” as their central themes.

Throughout this report we make comparisons among various employee subgroups. While such comparisons help to more fully interpret the findings, it is important to understand that the groups being compared are not independent. For example, in a comparison of men and women, the men and women in the comparison groups also belong to other groups, such as those based on grade level, education, job type, or age. Often, these and other factors cannot be dismissed as not playing a role in any of the differences that may be found. Consequently, the differences reported here should be viewed as descriptive only and group membership alone is not to be interpreted as the cause for any group difference.

Given the dramatic changes that are buffeting Federal workers, it is particularly important to consider the perceptions of this workforce at this time. Recent research findings repeatedly confirm that employee attitudes are important contributors to productivity.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the Board encourages Federal policymakers and managers to use the results of this survey and other sources of information as starting points for discussions about their management practices and policies; for making changes in those practices and policies, as appropriate; and for the design of long-term strategies for the use and development of the Federal workforce.

To facilitate presentation throughout this report, italicized text generally represents closely paraphrased descriptions of actual survey questions or their responses. Also for simplification, survey response options are usually combined and percents are rounded to whole numbers. Because of this rounding cumulative percentages do not always total 100 percent.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, “Report on the Significant Actions of the Office of Personnel Management During 1982,” Washington, DC, December 1983.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, “Federal Personnel Policies and Practices: Perspectives From the Workplace,” Washington, DC, December 1987.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, “Working for America: A Federal Employee Survey,” Washington, DC, June 1990.

<sup>6</sup> J.R. Hinrich, “Survey Data as a Catalyst for Employee Empowerment and Organizational Effectiveness.” In R.J. Niehaus and K.F. Price (eds.), “Bottom Line Results from Strategic Human Resource Planning,” Plenum Press, New York, 1991, pp. 301-308.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 302.

# Quality of the Federal Workforce

Federal workforce quality is an important concern of the American public, since Federal workers must be of sufficient quality to permit the Government to provide the services the American public requires. In the late 1980's, the general public as well as members of the public administration community were raising increased concerns about a possible decline in the quality of the Federal workforce. In response to this concern, MSPB and OPM convened an Advisory Committee on workforce quality assessment and established ongoing programs to monitor the quality of the workforce.

One of the major recommendations of the Advisory Committee was the adoption of a broad definition of workforce quality that recognizes the interaction of individual attributes, environmental forces, organizational processes, and individual, team, and organizational outcomes.<sup>8</sup> As Federal managers go through the process of reinventing their organizations, they are encouraged to take into account all of these aspects or components of workforce quality.

To help obtain some of the information about the perceptions of workforce quality, MSPB asked employees to give us their views about the quality of their coworkers, the employees who have left their work unit, and new employees. We also asked supervisors about the quality of applicants for job openings.

## What Do Employees Think of the Quality of Their Coworkers, the Employees Who Left Government, and New Employees?

When we asked employees about the quality of their coworkers, 56 percent of the employees rated their coworkers as *average* or *above average* in quality – up very slightly from the 53 percent in 1989. Figure 1 shows that the perceived quality of employees who left the Government was higher than the perceived quality of new hires both in 1989 and 1992. While this difference suggests a net decrease in workforce quality, the difference, in and of itself should be no reason for alarm. First, it is expected that the employees who have left would be rated higher in quality than new hires, since most of the employees who left are likely to have been experienced and fully qualified workers who left Government voluntarily. Second, research indicates that employees have a tendency to remember previous conditions (or former coworkers) more favorably than current conditions (or new coworkers).<sup>9</sup>

Because there is no reason to believe that these two factors would change between 1989 and 1992, it is much more significant in figure 1 that the difference or gap in quality between those who left the Government and new hires decreased from 20 percentage points in 1989 to 12 percentage points in 1992. This suggests an improvement in the quality differ-

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<sup>8</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board and Office of Personnel Management, "Federal Workforce Quality: Measurement and Improvement," Washington, DC, August 1992, p. xi.

<sup>9</sup> G.B. Lewis, "Pay and Job Satisfaction in the Federal Civil Service," *Review of Public Personnel Administration*, Summer 1991, vol. 11, No. 3, p. 20.

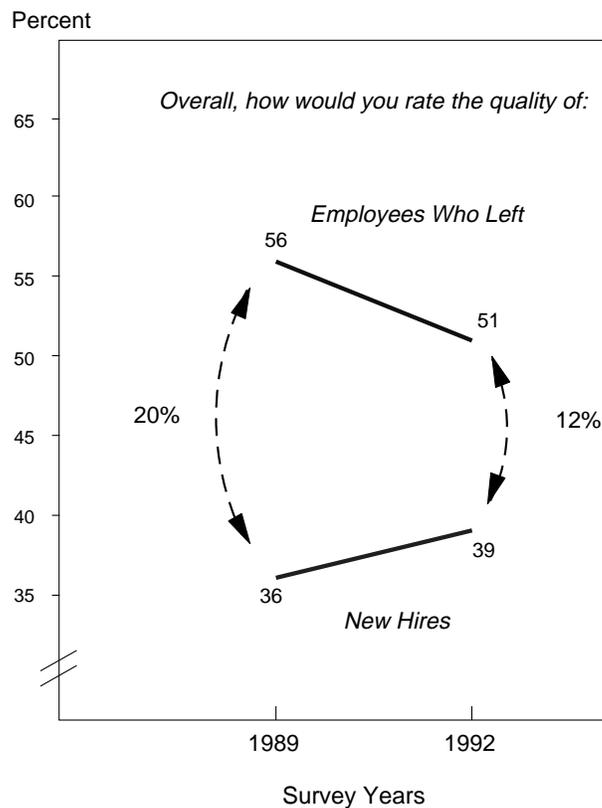
## Quality of the Federal Workforce

ence between those who left Government and new hires. This finding is consistent with findings from other studies, such as MSPB's 1992 study of procurement professionals<sup>10</sup> and OPM's 1992 study of scientists and engineers,<sup>11</sup> which found no meaningful declines in Federal workforce quality, even when less subjective measures of quality were examined, such as measures of education and experience.

*Due to the depressed job market, we have been able to hire some bright and energetic auditors for low salaries. However, when the economy turns around, many of these people will leave for higher paying jobs.*

A GM-13 Supervisor

**Figure 1. Quality of Employees Who Left And New Hires:  
Percent Rated Average or Above Average**



Sources: MSPB Merit Principles Surveys--1989 and 1992.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "Workforce Quality and Federal Procurement: An Assessment," Washington, DC, July 1992.

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Office of Personnel Management, "Scientists and Engineers in Civilian Agencies: Studies of Quality-Related Factors," Rept. No. WQR 91-01, Washington, DC, March 1991.

### How Do Supervisors Rate the Quality of Job Applicants?

Another possible indicator of the quality of the Federal workforce is the perception of supervisors about the quality of the applicants they encounter in filling job vacancies. To find out more about this issue, we asked supervisors in 1986, 1989, and 1992 to tell us to what extent the quality of applicants had *worsened* or *improved* in the preceding three years. While the percentage of supervisors who said the *quality of applicants had improved* dropped between 1986 and 1989, supervisors in 1992 reported substantial and consistent increases in the quality of applicants across a wide variety of job types and categories, as shown in figure 2. Except for blue-collar employees whose levels were the same, the 1992 applicant quality levels consistently exceeded the previous high levels of 1986.

*I am totally shocked by the way some employees do not work and the waste of time that is tolerated.*

A Newly Hired GS-12 Survey Respondent

While many supervisors in 1992 continued to say that the quality of applicants was *the same* or *had worsened*, the current trend and the increased willingness of Federal employees to *recommend the Government as a place to work* suggest that the image of the Federal Government as an employer improved substantially between 1989 and 1992. This is consistent with another Board survey in which we asked personnel officials in 22 Federal depart-

ments and agencies to describe their experiences in recruiting and selecting qualified applicants.<sup>12</sup> Declines in the labor market, new Government initiatives to enhance the quality of worklife, pay reform, and other factors were among the factors believed to contribute to the Government's current success in attracting high-quality applicants.

Even in this time of streamlining some Federal managers will have job vacancies to fill, and we encourage these managers to take advantage of the current surplus labor market and to hire and retain high-quality applicants. In selecting new hires, managers are encouraged to use selection mechanisms that have been shown to be effective entry sources for quality employees in the past.<sup>13</sup> In addition, managers should develop strategies to ensure the retention of these highly-qualified employees should the labor market change. Simultaneously, policymakers should continue to take steps to enhance the attractiveness of the Government as an employer to ensure that Federal managers will continue to have available a pool of highly-qualified applicants when the national economy and the labor market improve.

### What Ratings Do Subordinates Give Their Supervisors?

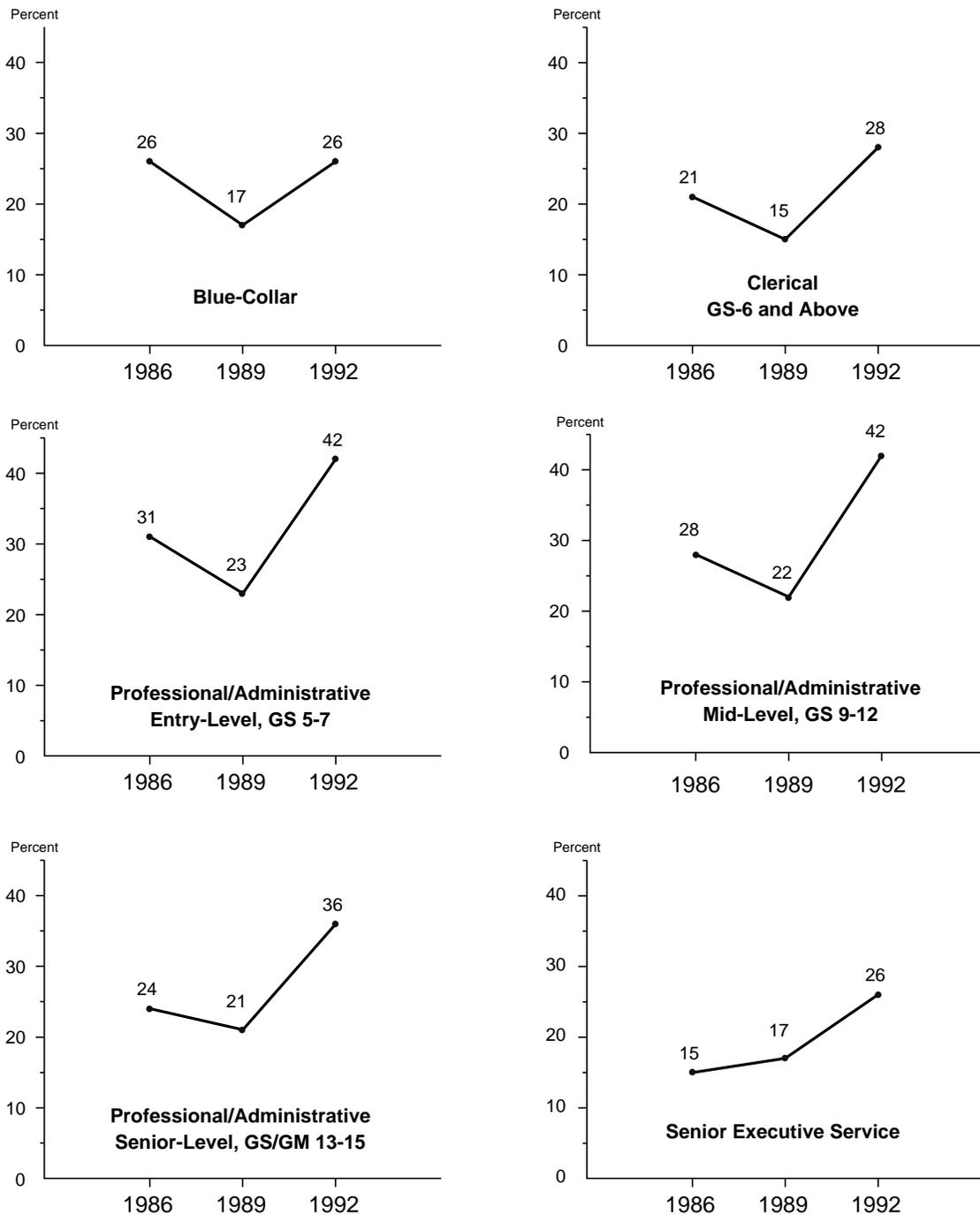
Previous studies by the Board have noted that while subordinates are fairly satisfied with their immediate supervisors in general, subordinates are less satisfied with some of the more specific aspects of their supervisors' performance.<sup>14</sup> The current findings are consistent with those of earlier studies.

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "Evolving Workforce Demographics: Federal Agency Action and Reaction," Washington, DC, November 1993, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "Entering Professional Positions in the Federal Government," Washington, DC, March 1994.

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "Federal First-Line Supervisors: How Good Are They?," Washington, DC, March 1992; "Working for America: A Federal Employee Survey," Washington, DC, June 1990; and "Federal Blue-Collar Employees: A Workforce in Transition," Washington, DC, December 1992.

**Figure 2. Quality of Applicants: Percent of Supervisors Saying Applicant Quality Has Improved in Selected Job Groups**



Sources: MSPB Merit Principles Surveys, 1986, 1989, and 1992.

*My agency and supervisor provide very little feedback on my performance. It is difficult to obtain any performance rating except "fully successful." My supervisor does not agree with the policy of giving awards or recognition, so he doesn't.*

A GS-11 Survey Respondent

Some 60 percent of the employees in 1992 indicated that they are *satisfied with their immediate supervisor*; 63 percent said their supervisors have *good technical skills*; and 56 percent said their supervisors *look out for their employees*. Only about half of the employees report that their immediate supervisor has *good leadership skills* (51 percent) or that their supervisor *organizes the group effectively* (49 percent).

Satisfaction with immediate supervisors did not vary consistently with the age, education level, or gender of the employees doing the ratings. However, blue-collar employees (55 percent) and minority group<sup>15</sup> employees (55 percent) tended to rate their supervisors consistently below the Governmentwide average (60 percent). On the other hand, members of the Senior Executive Service (SES) were the most satisfied (67 percent) with their higher-level supervisors or managers.

*When a supervisor is selected, not only do they need to be qualified but they need to be able to work with people and understand people.*

A GS-3 Survey Respondent

It must be noted that these ratings of supervisors reflect only the ratings made by the supervisors' subordinates. A previous Board study of first-line supervisors found that subordinates of supervisors tend to give supervisors consistently lower ratings than those given by the supervisors themselves or by the managers (supervisors) of first-line supervisors.<sup>16</sup> Just as an evaluation of the quality of the workforce as a whole must include an examination of environmental forces and organizational processes and outcomes, so must an evaluation of supervisor quality go beyond the evaluation of attributes of individual supervisors. In addition

*Today's supervisors are taxed with so many extra duties and details that we don't have the time to take care of our most important resource – our people.*

A WS-11 Blue-Collar Supervisor

to the perceptions of subordinates, organizational and procedural constraints on supervisors need to be evaluated in any final assessment of the quality of supervision in the Government. Nevertheless, these survey findings suggest that there remains room for improvement in the quality of Federal supervisors and their style of supervision.

<sup>15</sup> For these analyses, "minority" refers to African Americans (Black, not of Hispanic origin), Asian Pacific Americans (Asian American or Pacific Islander American), Hispanics, and Native American (American Indian or Alaskan Native). "Nonminority" refers to Whites, not of Hispanic origin.

<sup>16</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "Federal First-Line Supervisors: How Good Are They?" Washington, DC, March 1992, p. 2.

# Perceptions of Fair Treatment and Discrimination

The civil service laws call for fair treatment of all employees and applicants for Federal employment.<sup>17</sup> They also specifically make it a prohibited personnel practice to discriminate against employees or applicants “on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, age, national origin, handicapping condition, marital status or political affiliation.”<sup>18</sup> In addition to being required by law, fair and non-discriminating treatment of employees is good management. It leads to a satisfied and productive workforce. In order to assess how Federal employees feel about their treatment by the Government, we asked them a series of questions related to fairness perceptions and discrimination issues.

## Fairness of Treatment in Promotions, Awards, Training, and Job Assignments

Figure 3 shows the extent to which employees in 1992 believed they had been treated fairly and unfairly<sup>19</sup> with regard to *promotions, awards, training, and job assignments*. Generally, the percentages of employees who believed they had been treated fairly with regard to *awards* and *training* were about the same as the percentages of employees who believed they had been treated unfairly. With regard to *promotions*, however, substantially more employees believed they had been treated unfairly than believed they had been treated fairly (47 percent versus 34 percent). With regard to *job*

*assignments*, the reverse was true. There were nearly twice as many employees who believed they had been treated fairly (45 percent) as there were employees who believed they had been treated unfairly (26 percent). None of these findings were notably different from those of 1986 and 1989.

Perceptions of fair treatment also tend to vary by sex and minority/nonminority group status. Although the differences are small, table 1 shows that generally more men felt treated unfairly than women, particularly with regard to *promotions* and *awards*. Similarly, minority group members were more likely than nonminority group members to believe they had been treated unfairly.

Figure 4 shows that the percentages of employees who believe they have been treated unfairly with regard to *promotions* and *awards* vary considerably when the employees’ gender and minority/nonminority status are considered simultaneously. While more minorities than nonminorities believed they had been treated unfairly, the men in each group consistently perceived more unfair treatment than the women. Minority men perceived the most unfair treatment, while nonminority women perceived the least unfair treatment.

*The extreme secrecy with which cash awards are given here leads me to believe that inequities exist. An award, cash or otherwise, should be a public honor.*

A GS-12 Computer Specialist

<sup>17</sup> For example, see 5 U.S.C. 2301(b).

<sup>18</sup> For example, see 5 U.S.C. 2302(b).

<sup>19</sup> For convenience, “fair” refers to the responses of employees who said they had been treated fairly *to a great extent* or *to a considerable extent*. Similarly, “unfair” combines the responses of employees who said they were treated fairly *to a little extent* or *to no extent*.

## Perceptions of Fair Treatment and Discrimination

Some other employee groups also differed notably from the average in their perceptions of fair treatment. For example, blue-collar employees consistently perceived unfair treatment more frequently than the Governmentwide average. With regard to promotions, 58 percent of blue-collar employees believed they had been treated unfairly compared to the 47 percent Governmentwide average. On the other hand, 30 percent of the SES perceived unfair treatment in promotions – almost half the blue-collar average.

There were no meaningful differences in perceptions of fair treatment by levels of *education*, and employee *age* was only a factor in perceptions of fairness in *promotions*. Specifically, 55 percent of the employees over age 50 felt they were treated unfairly with regard to promotions, compared to 40 percent of those under 40.

*I have to rate employees based on a quota system. I was ordered to lower two ratings to meet quotas. Quality of work was never mentioned as a reason to lower these ratings.*

A GM-13 Supervisor

It is important to determine to what extent these perceptions of fairness or lack of fairness may be related to the actual number of promotions and awards received by members of these various employee groups. For example, men having a higher average grade than women may perceive more unfair treatment because there are fewer promotions at these higher grade levels. On the other hand, minorities who have a lower average

**Table 1. Perceptions of Unfair Treatment: By Gender and Minority/Nonminority Group Status**

*In the past 2 years, to what extent do you believe you have been treated fairly regarding the following:*

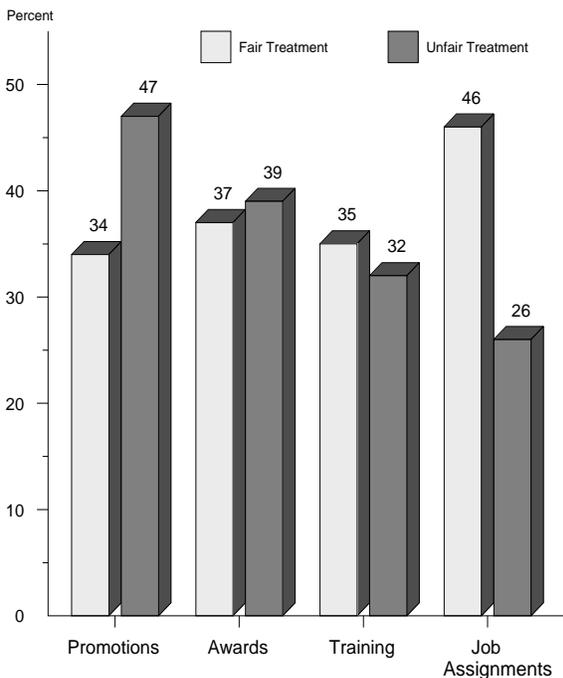
Percent Responding “To a little extent” or “To no extent”

Survey Statements	Percent Responding “To a little extent” or “To no extent”			
	Women	Men	Non-Minority	Minority
Promotions	45	48	45	53
Awards	36	41	37	46
Training	30	33	31	35
Job assignments	27	26	24	32

Note: “Unfair” treatment refers to the responses of employees who said they had been treated fairly “to a little extent” or “to no extent.”

## Perceptions of Fair Treatment and Discrimination

**Figure 3. Perceptions of Fair and Unfair Treatment: Promotions, Awards, Training and Job Assignments**

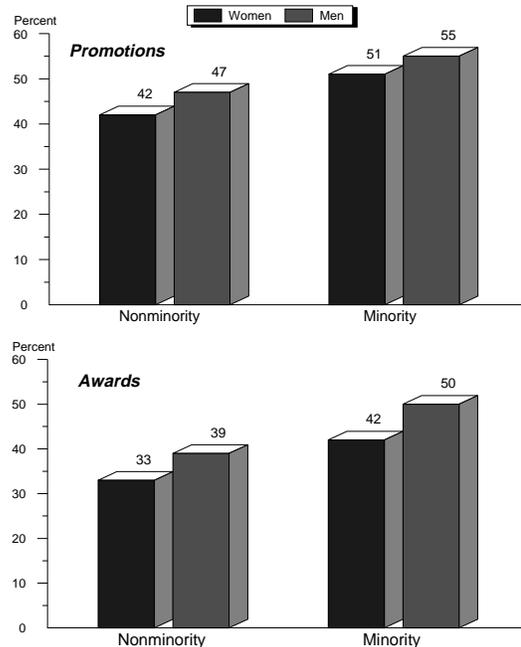


Note. For convenience, "fair" refers to employees who said they had been treated fairly "to a great extent" or "to a considerable extent." "Unfair" combines the responses of employees who said they had been treated fairly "to a little extent" or "to no extent." "Some extent" responses are not shown.

Source: MSPB Merit Principles Survey, 1992.

**Figure 4. Percent Minority and Nonminority Men and Women Saying They Feel Treated Unfairly With Regard to Promotions and Awards**

To what extent do you believe you have been treated unfairly?



Note. "Unfair treatment" refers here to the responses of employees who said they were treated fairly "to a little extent" or "to no extent."

Source: MSPB Merit Principles Survey, 1992.

grade may feel that they are not receiving their fair share of the greater availability of promotions at the lower grade levels. Generally, groups defined by different levels of job performance (e.g., outstanding versus fully successful) are expected to and should share disproportionately in the number of available promotions and awards. However, when groups are defined by gender, race, national origin, age or similar characteristics, the groups should receive proportionate shares of job rewards, provided the groups are equivalent in levels of education, experience, job performance, and other merit factors.

If actual promotions and awards are not distributed evenly among employee groups with equivalent education, experience, and job performance, it becomes important to find out why and to ensure that any uneven distributions are not the result of bias. If promotions and awards are distributed evenly among equated groups, it becomes important to find out why so many employees continue to perceive they are being treated unfairly. Consequently, managers and supervisors need to monitor promotion rates and other awards in their

## Perceptions of Fair Treatment and Discrimination

organizations to ensure that all employees are treated fairly with regard to all aspects of Federal personnel management.

### Unlawful Discrimination

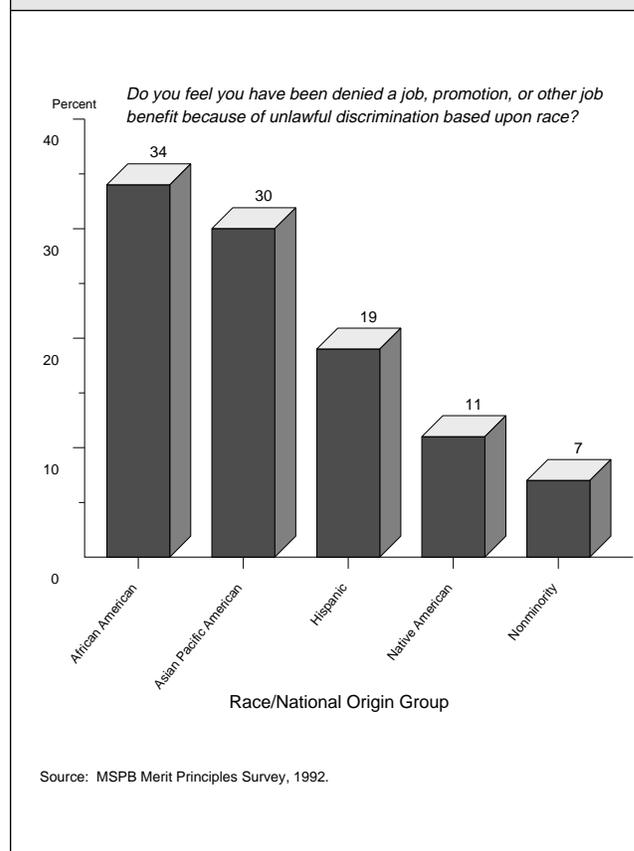
One possible factor in perceptions of unfair treatment is discrimination. Both in 1986 and 1989, we asked employees if they felt they had been *denied a job or job reward based on race, color, religion, sex, age, national origin, handicapping condition, or marital status*. (A separate question asked about discrimination based on *political affiliation*.) Laws and regulations are designed to protect employees against unlawful discrimination based on any one or more of these bases. Some 11 percent of the employees in 1986 and 15 percent in 1989 said that they had experienced such discrimination.<sup>20</sup> Because these earlier survey questions did not specifically ask about each type of discrimination (except for *political affiliation*), it was impossible to determine the exact nature of the discrimination being reported on these surveys.

**Incidence rates for different types of discrimination.** In order to obtain more precise information about the different sources of discrimination, the 1992 MPS asked specifically about each type of discrimination. Some 12 percent reported unlawful discrimination based on *race*; 12 percent reported discrimination based on *gender*; and 10 percent reported discrimination based on *age*. Each of five other types of discrimination were alleged by fewer than 5 percent of the respondents, namely: *national origin* (4 percent), *handicapping condition* (3 percent), *marital status* (3 percent), *religion* (2 percent), and *political affiliation* (2 percent).

**Discrimination based on race.** Although about 1 in 8 Federal employees believed they experienced discrimination based on *race*, for some employee groups the proportion was much higher. While 7 percent of the nonminority employees reported

discrimination based on race, 28 percent of minority group members reported such discrimination. Figure 5 shows that the incidence of perceived *race discrimination* ranges from 34 percent for African Americans to 7 percent for nonminorities. Within each race/national origin (RNO) group,<sup>21</sup> there were no noteworthy male-female differences, except for Asian Pacific Americans, as shown in figure 6. Asian Pacific American men reported nearly twice as much race discrimination as Asian Pacific American women. This is an effect that warrants further examination.

**Figure 5. Percent of Employees Perceiving Discrimination Based on Race: By Race/National Origin Group**



<sup>20</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "Working for America: A Federal Employee Survey," Washington, DC, June 1990, p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> Race/National Origin (RNO) groups for these analyses are African Americans (Black, not of Hispanic origin), Hispanics, Asian Pacific Americans (Asian American or Pacific Islander American), Native Americans (American Indian or Alaskan Native), and Nonminorities (Whites, not of Hispanic origin).

## Perceptions of Fair Treatment and Discrimination

*People who have started years after me with even less education are up for GS-9.*

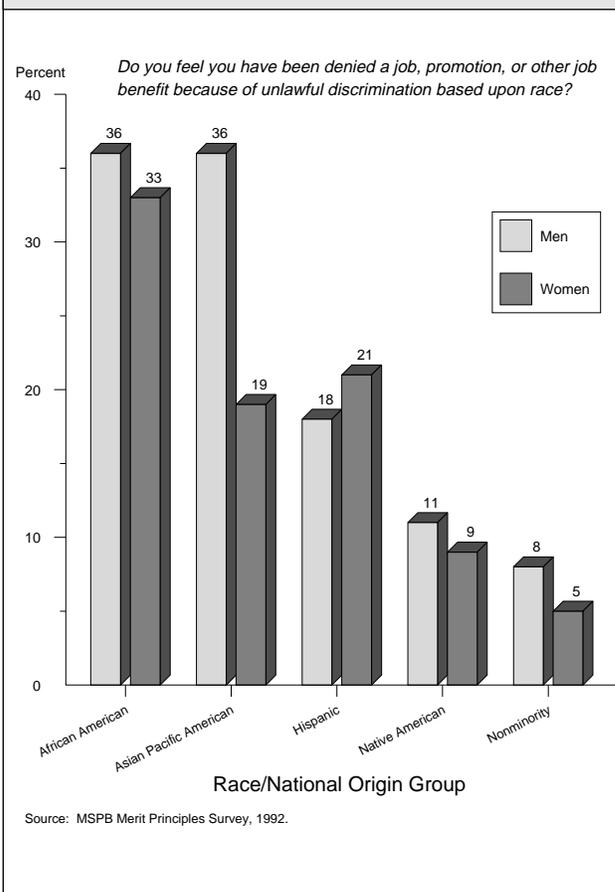
A GS-4 Nonminority Clerk with 10 years service

### Discrimination based on national origin.

Governmentwide, the percentage of employees who believed that they had been subjected to national origin discrimination was 4 percent. This average is relatively low, in large part, because it includes nonminority employees—over 70 percent of the Government’s workforce—who rarely believe they have been subjected to discrimination based on national origin. However, for members of specific minority groups, experiences of such discrimination are reported much more frequently. Specifically, figure 7 shows that 29 percent of the Government’s Asian Pacific American employees and 14 percent of its Hispanic employees felt they had been denied a job, promotion, or other job reward within the past 2 years because of their national origin. And, in those minority groups, as well as among African Americans and nonminorities (but not among Native Americans), more men reported national origin discrimination than women, as shown in figure 8. For example, while 35 percent of the Asian American men reported national origin discrimination, the figure for Asian American women was 20 percent.

Further analyses of the data indicated that race discrimination and national origin discrimination were interrelated in a complex way that varied considerably by RNO group. While the overall relationship was moderately strong, the relationship was relatively weak for African Americans and nonminorities, intermediate for Hispanics, and very strong for Asian Pacific Americans.<sup>22</sup> For example, of the Asian Pacific Islanders who reported race discrimination, 95 percent also re-

**Figure 6. Percent Men and Women Perceiving Discrimination Based on Race: By Race/National Origin Group**



ported discrimination based on national origin—compared to 56 percent of Hispanics, 21 percent of African Americans, and 18 percent of nonminorities. (There were too few respondents in the breakout for comparing Native American perceptions of race and national origin discrimination.) The results emphasize the complexity of perceptions of discrimination and their variation by RNO group.

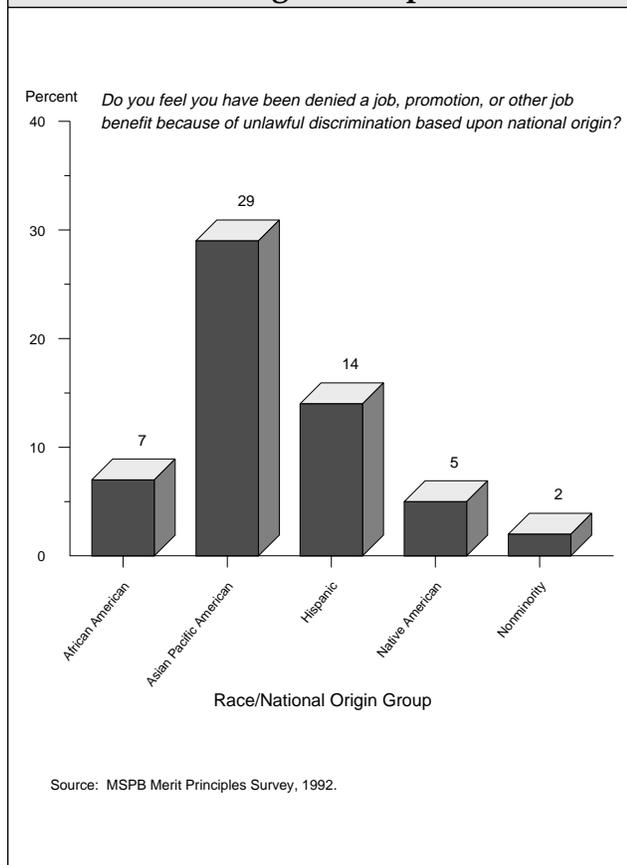
**Discrimination based on sex.** Since race discrimination was perceived much more frequently by

<sup>22</sup> Pearson product moment correlations ( $r$ ) between race discrimination and national origin discrimination were: .47 overall; .38 for African Americans; .93 for Asian Pacific Americans; .60 for Hispanics; .50 for Native Americans; and .35 for nonminorities. A value of 1.00 would indicate a complete one-for-one correspondence between race and national origin discrimination.

## Perceptions of Fair Treatment and Discrimination

minority than nonminority employees, a person might expect that discrimination based on gender would be perceived much more frequently by women than by men. This was not the case. Women reported *discrimination based on gender* only slightly more frequently than men (14 percent versus 11 percent).

**Figure 7. Percent of Employees Perceiving Discrimination Based on National Origin: By Race/National Origin Group**



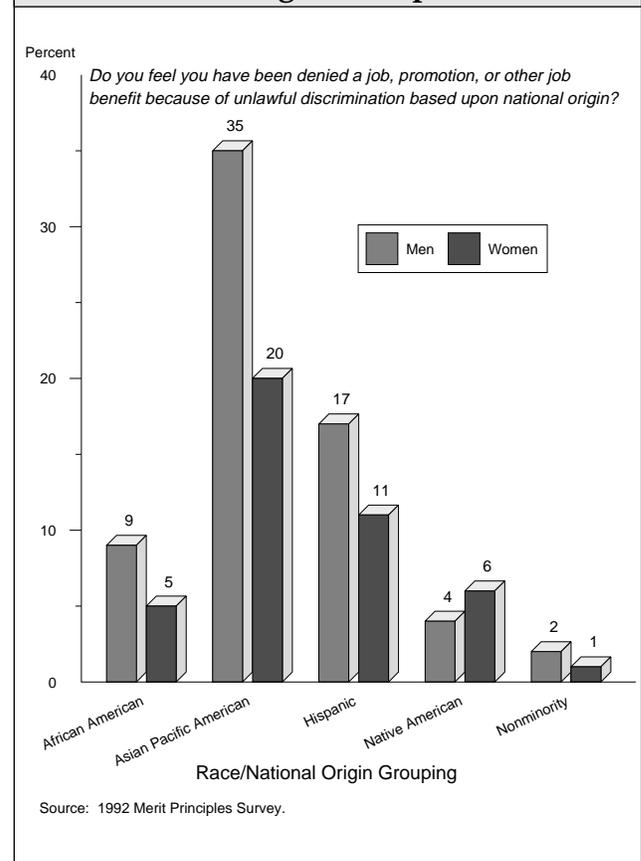
However, figure 9 shows that perceptions of sex discrimination tended to vary more by RNO group membership than by gender, although the differences were slight. Gender differences, however, tended to manifest themselves more prominently within some RNO groups, as shown in figure 10. While African American and nonminority men and women differed little in their reports of sex discrimination, men and women in the Asian Pacific

American, Hispanic, and Native American RNO groups differed dramatically. Within each of these latter RNO groups, the women reported substantially more sex discrimination than did the men.

While it may be difficult for minority women to know whether they were being discriminated against because of their race or gender, it is unclear why so many would attribute the discrimination they experience to gender rather than RNO.

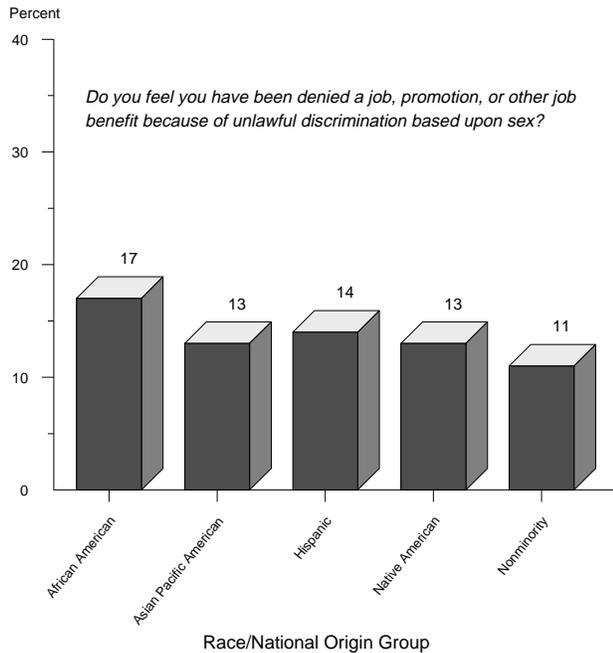
The particular plight of minority women was noted in MSPB's 1992 study of the glass ceiling for women. In that study we found that minority women were even more poorly represented than

**Figure 8. Percent of Men and Women Perceiving Discrimination Based on National Origin: By Race/National Origin Group**



## Perceptions of Fair Treatment and Discrimination

**Figure 9. Percent of Employees Perceiving Discrimination Based on Sex: By Race/National Origin Group**



Source: MSPB Merit Principles Survey, 1992.

nonminority women in top-level professional and administrative jobs.<sup>23</sup> While such differences in representation or perceptions of discrimination, in and of themselves, are not evidence of discrimina-

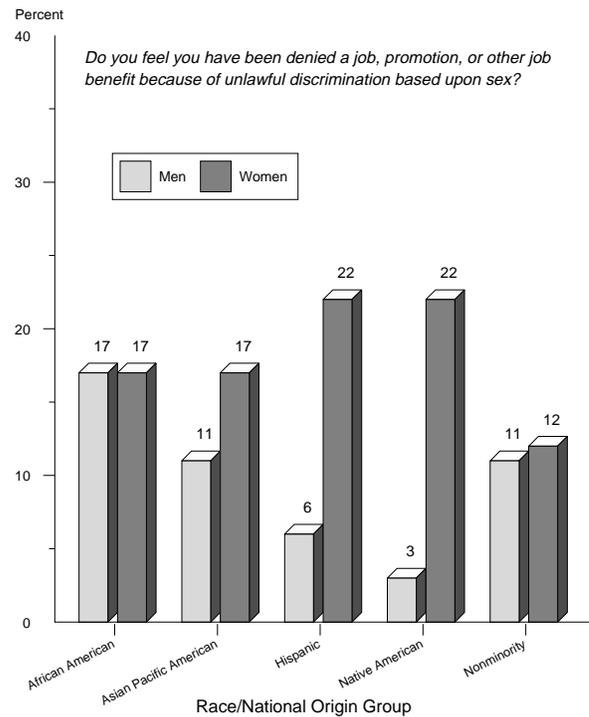
*Sex discrimination is rampant in my organization. If you attend a staff meeting, the only woman there is the one taking the minutes.*

A GM-13 Female Respondent

tion, they nevertheless raise red flags and suggest a need for further analysis.

**Discrimination based on age.** We found that different age groups did not vary in their perceptions of discrimination based on *race, gender, or national origin*. However, as would be expected, age was a major factor in perceptions of *age discrimination*. While 10 percent of the employees said they felt discriminated against because of their age, only 5 percent of employees under age 40 and just 6 percent of employees between the ages of 40 and 49 reported this type of discrimination. However, among employees over the age of 50, the incidence

**Figure 10. Percent of Men and Women Perceiving Discrimination Based on Sex: By Race/National Origin Group**



Source: MSPB Merit Principles Survey, 1992.

<sup>23</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "A Question of Equity: Women and the Glass Ceiling in the Federal Government," Washington, DC, October 1992, p. 33.

## Perceptions of Fair Treatment and Discrimination

rate nearly quadrupled to 21, as shown in figure 11. Although all employees above age 40 have legal status for filing age discrimination complaints, perceptions of age discrimination do not appear to manifest themselves in sizable numbers until after the age of 50. While employees are in their 40's, they may interpret being passed over for job assignments, training, promotions, or other job rewards as temporary setbacks attributable to factors unrelated to their age. However, if the setbacks continue into their 50's, an increasing percentage feel that unsupportable attitudes,

assumptions, or stereotypes about older workers may be a basis for their lack of career advancement.

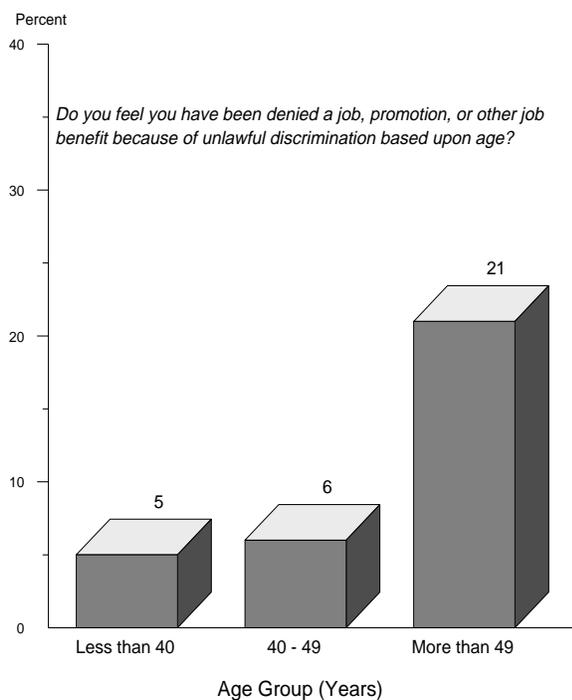
### Unfair Treatment and Discrimination

There is an interrelationship between perceptions of unfair treatment and perceptions of discriminatory treatment that should be explored. In that regard, it is interesting to note that high percentages of every RNO group believed that they had been treated unfairly with regard to promotions in the past 2 years. Some 50 percent of African Americans believed that they had been treated unfairly in promotions; 57 percent of Asian Americans and Hispanics also believed that, as did 46 percent of the Native Americans and 45 percent of the nonminorities.

The relative similarity among RNO groups in beliefs of unfair treatment with regard to promotions was not matched by a similarity in their beliefs regarding discriminatory treatment, as shown in figure 12. While a relatively large percentage (45 to 57 percent) of employees in all RNO groups perceived unfair treatment in promotions, discrimination based on race was considerably higher for African Americans (34 percent) and Asian Pacific Americans (30 percent) than for Native Americans (11 percent) and nonminorities (7 percent). Hispanics (19 percent) were intermediate. The findings clearly suggest that the components of factors comprising perceptions of unfair treatment vary by RNO group.

Managers and supervisors should do more to identify and reduce the persistent reports of discrimination and other prohibited personnel practices that continue to plague the Federal workplace. Because the majority of Federal employees are nonminorities who tend not to perceive a problem with discrimination, the overall percentages are relatively low. However, among employees in

**Figure 11. Percent of Employees Perceiving Discrimination Based on Age: By Selected Age Groups**



Note. There were minimal differences between men (9%) and women (11%) or between minority (12%) and nonminority (9%) group members.

Source: MSPB Merit Principles Survey, 1992.

## Perceptions of Fair Treatment and Discrimination

groups which are most likely to be targets of discrimination, the numbers are significantly higher. Because fairness is such an important component of employee job satisfaction and organizational success, managers and supervisors should make special efforts to articulate how their personnel decisions are made. Employees who have access to accurate information about personnel decisions and how they are made are more likely to be satisfied with their jobs (and productive) than employees who do not have such accurate information, provided that the information reveals fair treatment.<sup>24</sup>

### Views About Affirmative Action Considerations

The civil rights laws require Federal agencies to have affirmative action programs aimed at eliminating historical underrepresentation of minorities and women in the Government's workforce. Provisions calling for affirmative action programs were reinforced by many of the provisions of the Civil Service Reform Act which passed in 1978. It called for a workforce reflective of the Nation's diversity as a goal of Government, it required the Government to conduct recruitment programs aimed at eliminating the underrepresentation at every grade level and in every occupation, and it said that the performance ratings of the Government's top managers, the SES,

should be judged, in part, on how they met affirmative action goals.

In order to obtain the views of Federal employees about the Government's affirmative action policy, we asked employees to indicate the extent to which they *agreed* or *disagreed* with the statement, *Affirmative action considerations should be taken into account when choosing among highly-qualified candidates.*

While women, minorities, and members of the SES were generally supportive of affirmative action programs, less than half (44 percent) the employees Governmentwide agreed that affirmative action should be taken into account, while 33 percent *disagreed*. Nonminority men were the least positive about affirmative action considerations with just 31 percent agreeing with the survey statement and 45 percent disagreeing.

Women were significantly more likely to support (52 percent versus

39 percent) affirmative action considerations than men, while minority employees were nearly twice as likely (69 percent versus 35 percent) to support such consideration as nonminority employees. Since women and minority employees are the most likely recipients of affirmative action benefits, it is not surprising to find these differences in percep-

#### TWO COMMENTS – TWO VIEWS:

*There are no minority or women supervisors, nor is there any system in place to create any. The only people in this organization who thrive are middle-aged white males.*

A GS-9 African-American Male Respondent

*The personnel office of this and other agencies are now applying reverse discrimination. Newly-hired white males are actively discouraged from seeking supervisory positions, while marginally qualified female and minority candidates are being promoted and given advantages over better qualified Caucasian male employees.*

A GS-14 Nonminority Male Respondent

<sup>24</sup>L.A. Witt and L.G. Nye, "Gender and the Relationship Between Perceived Fairness of Pay or Promotion and Job Satisfaction," Journal of Applied Psychology, 1992, vol. 77, No. 6, p. 916.

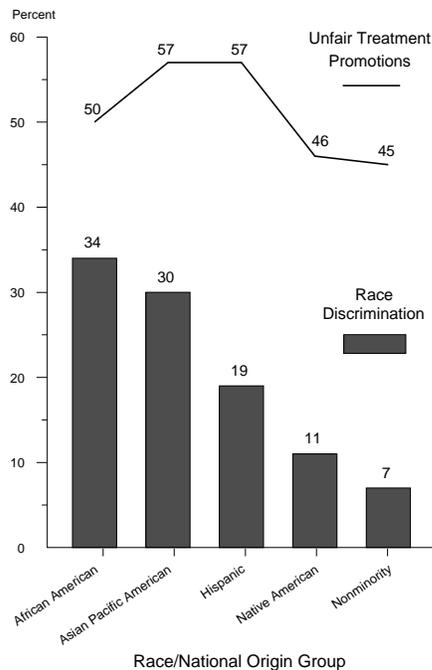
## Perceptions of Fair Treatment and Discrimination

tions. A recent study found that the differences in attitudes towards affirmative action were due in large part to the different meanings that different employee groups gave to “affirmative action considerations.”<sup>25</sup> The study recommended the elimination of misperceptions about affirmative action programs and suggested that affirmative action programs be designed in such a way as to minimize opposition to them.

*Affirmative action and whistleblower policies are useless, if a first-line supervisor can manipulate the facts in a believable manner and retaliate against the employee! My supervisor is a master at manipulating the system to suit his need and the needs of a few favorite employees!*

A GS-5 Survey Respondent

**Figure 12. Comparison of Perceptions of Unfair Treatment and Perceptions of Race Discrimination: By Race/National Origin Group**



Note. "Unfair Treatment" refers to "little" or "no" fair treatment in promotion.  
Source: MSPB Merit Principles Survey, 1992.

One of the highest levels of agreement with the statement about *affirmative action considerations* came from members of the SES. Almost two-thirds (64 percent) of SES members agreed that *affirmative action considerations* should be taken into account when choosing among highly-qualified candidates. Nevertheless, nearly one-third of the SES did not agree with this key policy decision of the Government. It is not known to what extent the support for affirmative action considerations coincide with the inclusion of equal employment opportunity elements in the performance appraisal ratings of many SES members.

<sup>25</sup>D.A. Kravitz and J. Platania, "Attitudes and Beliefs About Affirmative Action: Effects of Target Group and of Respondent Sex and Ethnicity," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 1993, vol. 78, No. 6., pp. 928-938.

# Retaliation for Whistleblowing and Other Prohibited Personnel Practices

The Board's charter to report to the President and Congress on whether the "public interest in a civil service free from prohibited practices is being protected" extends beyond issues of discrimination. It also specifically includes retaliation for whistleblowing, unfair denials of jobs, threats, and certain other prohibited personnel practices. Consequently, the Board has regularly surveyed Federal employees about their perceptions of illegal or wasteful activities, their views about whistleblowing, their experiences with retaliation for whistleblowing, and other prohibited personnel practices.

## Whistleblowing and Reprisals for Doing So

In the current environment wherein Federal employees are being empowered and encouraged to become more involved in identifying and resolving work-related problems, there is likely to be an upsurge in the identification of fraud, waste, and abuse. Consequently, the Board devoted part of the 1992 MPS to whistleblowing, replicating and updating surveys conducted by the Board in 1980 and 1983. Since the detailed analyses of these questions are contained in a separate Board report,<sup>26</sup> only the highlights are presented here.

The Board found that 18 percent of Federal employees claimed they had seen or obtained direct evidence of one or more illegal or wasteful activities--down from 23 percent in 1983. In addition,

while the incidents of known illegal or wasteful activities decreased between 1983 and 1992, the percentage of employees who said they reported it increased from 30 percent to 60 percent.

Although it is encouraging to find a decrease in illegal or wasteful activities and an increase in the willingness of employees to report the activities, there are also some causes for concern. Over a

*The reality is that going against your supervisor – fair or unfair – kills your career.*

A GM-14 Survey Respondent

third (37 percent) of the employees who reported illegal or wasteful activity said they had been victims of reprisal because of their disclosures. This rate of reprisal is significantly higher than the 24-percent rate reported by employees in 1983.

Based on these findings, the Board's report encouraged agencies to emphasize organizational change and improvement efforts that will result in a workplace where all members of the organization value the legitimate disclosure of problems and where managers and employees alike can resolve those problems in a non-threatening and constructive manner. Agencies were also encouraged to actively solicit employee views and to give employees feedback concerning those views.

<sup>26</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "Whistleblowing in the Federal Government: An Update," Washington, DC, October 1993.

A number of tools are available to help managers create such a non-threatening environment. Many of these were examined in a 1986 Board report and represent a mixture both of common sense and good management.<sup>27</sup> Certainly, employee opinion surveys can be useful for identifying basic issues and problems, for stimulating discussion about possible solutions, and for developing strategies that result in positive change. In addition, open door policies, hotlines, suggestion programs, and employee involvement programs were found to be effective in many agencies. The new labor-management partnership councils resulting from the NPR also may become useful forums for constructively dealing with issues of waste, fraud, and abuse. Whatever tools are employed, they will only be successful to the extent that they include the following, as well as other, elements: top-level commitment, allocation of resources, both upward and downward communication, and a willingness to deal with results in good faith.

### Unfair Denials of Jobs, Threats, Retaliations, and Other Prohibited Personnel Practices

In addition to prohibiting reprisals for reporting fraud, waste, or abuse, the CSRA specifically prohibited a variety of other personnel practices, ranging from unlawful discrimination (discussed earlier) to the taking or not taking of personnel actions for political reasons. Table 2 shows that generally fewer than 10 percent of Federal employees reported experiencing these various prohibited personnel practices in 1986 and 1989.

The response rate for one survey question reached a sufficiently high level in 1986 and 1989 to warrant a cautionary mention. Specifically, 28 percent and 30 percent of the survey respondents said they had been *denied a job or job reward as a result of another person's selection based on the "buddy system" without*

*regard to merit.*<sup>28</sup> However, the vagueness of the question made further interpretations difficult. Consequently, we designed the 1992 survey questions to help clarify the nature of this perception.

In 1992, we found that about one in five (19 percent) employees believed they had been *denied a job or promotion because an unlawful advantage was given to another applicant*. One in six (16 percent) felt they had been *deliberately misled by an agency official about their right to compete for a job or promotion*. Although

*I have been in the same job for 18 years!!  
I have been turned down for five promotions  
even after making the best qualified list each  
time. My agency does not promote people  
with skills. You must be a good friend of  
management or be a white male!*

A GS-11 African-American Woman  
with 20 years service

these percentages are not nearly as high as those reported for selections made on the basis of the *buddy system*, the rates can be noticeably higher among members of some employee groups. For example, 27 percent of minority group members felt they had been *unlawfully denied a job*, and 22 percent felt they had been *deliberately misled about their right to compete for a job or promotion*. Even though these are unproven perceptions, these rates are too high for a Civil Service committed to the merit principles and a workplace free of prohibited personnel practices.

Compared to the percentages of employees who felt they were denied a job or misled about their right to compete, we are encouraged to find that almost no employees reported being *pressured into unlawful*

<sup>27</sup>U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "Getting Involved: Improving Federal Management With Employee Participation," May 1986, pp. 4-9.

<sup>28</sup>U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "Working for America: A Federal Employee Survey," June 1990, p. 6.

**Table 2. Perceptions of Prohibited Personnel Practices: Unlawful Activities, Pressures, and Retaliations in 1986, 1989, and 1992**

Survey Questions	Percent Responding "Yes"		
	1986	1981	1992
<b>In the past 2 years, do you feel you have been:</b>			
Denied a job or promotion because one of the selecting or recommending officials gave an unlawful advantage to another applicant	—	—	19
Denied a job or job reward as a result of another person's selection based on the "buddy system" without regard to merit?	28	30	—
Denied a job or job reward as a result of political affiliation?	1	2	2
Deliberately misled by an agency official about your right to compete for a job or promotion?	—	—	16
Influenced by an agency official to withdraw from competition for a Federal job or promotion in order to help another person's chances for getting that job or promotion?	4	5	5
Denied a job or promotion which went instead to a relative of one of the selecting or recommending officials?	6	6	4
<b>In the past 2 years, do you feel you have been retaliated against or threatened with retaliation for:</b>			
Exercising any appeal, complaint or grievance right?	—	—	11
Making disclosures concerning health and safety dangers, unlawful behavior, and/or fraud, waste, and abuse?	—	—	8
Testifying for or otherwise assisting any individual in the exercise of whistleblowing, EEO, or appeal rights?	—	7	6
Refusing to obey an unlawful order?	—	—	4
<b>In the past 2 years, do you feel you have been pressured by an agency official:</b>			
To resign or transfer as a result of political affiliation?	1	2	—
To engage in political activity in violation of the Hatch Act?	—	—	1
To retaliate against or take an action in favor of another Federal employee or applicant for political reasons?	—	—	2
Note: Dashes (—) indicate that a comparable question was not asked in that year.			

## Retaliation for Whistleblowing and Other Prohibited Personnel Practices

activities (1 percent) or feeling *retaliated against for their political affiliation* (2 percent). Slightly more employees said that they had been *influenced to withdraw from a job competition to give another applicant an advantage* (5 percent), felt they had been *denied a job which went to a relative of the selecting official* (4 percent), or felt *retaliated against for refusing to obey an unlawful order* (4 percent).

There is greater cause for concern that 11 percent of the employees felt they had been *retaliated against or threatened for exercising their appeal, complaint, or grievance rights* or even for *assisting another person in the exercise of their rights* (6 percent). There is also concern that overall 8 percent of the employees felt *retaliation for making disclosures concerning health and safety dangers, unlawful behaviors, and/or waste, fraud, and abuse*. While these percentages may not appear

*This is a great place to work. The environment is discrimination-free and most of the people are hard workers.*

A GS-9 Minority Survey Respondent

to be large, Governmentwide they nevertheless represent substantial numbers of employees. For example, each 10 percent represents about 170,000 civil servants. In addition, when we compare the reports of retaliation against the number of employees who actually reported waste, fraud, and abuse, the incidence rate of retaliation is much higher—37 percent.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> For more details, see: U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, “Whistleblowing in the Federal Government: An Update,” Washington, DC, October 1993.

# Views on Job Skills, Training Needed, and Training Received

Training is an essential component in the management of a quality workforce. This is particularly the case in an organization such as the Federal Government which has many jobs for which there are no private sector counterparts and for which no training is available outside Government. Training becomes even more important in an organization when its missions change, new technologies alter its work processes, or cutbacks require the organization to do more with less. MSPB recognized the importance of training by making it the subject of one of its upcoming studies. The NPR also recognized the importance of training and considered training to be a key requirement in the reinvention of Government and empowerment of employees.<sup>30</sup>

Almost half (49 percent) of the survey respondents indicated that the *nature of their work had changed substantially over the past 3 years*. When it comes to job skills, 92 percent of the employees reported *having the skills needed to do their jobs*. Despite this high percentage, 32 percent acknowledged that they *need more training to perform their job effectively*.

While 59 percent indicated that *training as a Federal employee has effectively prepared them to perform their jobs*, just half (49 percent) of the respondents said

*they had received the training needed to keep pace with their changing job requirements*. Even fewer respondents (44 percent) reported that they were *being trained on new technology as it is brought into the office*.

Women were *trained on new technology* more often than men, 51 percent versus 39 percent. Blue-collar employees reported receiving the least *training on new technology* (33 percent). Thus, while nearly all employees feel they can do their job, many believe they can do it more effectively with additional training, and 58 percent requested some form of formal training in the last year.

The findings confirm that there remains a significant need for additional training and that Federal employees are more than willing to learn new skills and adapt to changes in the workplace. Increasingly, Federal managers need to think of training not as a cost but as an investment. A knowledgeable, well-trained, and multi-skilled workforce is an essential component of an efficient and effective Government. A more detailed analysis and discussion of training in the Federal workforce will be included in an MSPB report to be released later in 1994.

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<sup>30</sup>National Performance Review, op. cit., pp. 77-84.

# Job Satisfaction

Previous studies by MSPB,<sup>31</sup> the reports of the Vice President's NPR,<sup>32</sup> reports by the General Accounting Office (GAO),<sup>33</sup> and others have repeatedly pointed out a need to improve Government management. Because the recommendations from these initiatives must ultimately be implemented and operationalized by Federal employees, it is important to know more about what they think and how they feel about their jobs. Of all possible questions that can be asked on employee surveys, questions about employee job satisfaction have been the most pervasive in both the private and the public sectors.

While early survey research focused on linking job satisfaction to individual productivity, turnover, or absenteeism, more recent studies suggest that the effects of job satisfaction are complex and may be more evident in measures of organizational performance than individual performance.<sup>34</sup> This complexity is reflected in the words of the Director of Customer Satisfaction of General Motors who said, " \* \* \* there's a strong correlation between employee satisfaction and customer satisfaction. If employees are unhappy and worried about \* \* \* the quality of their worklife, they won't worry about customers."<sup>35</sup>

*The Government could use employees much more effectively. Presently, people are being stifled. What people are capable of doing is not considered as important as whether or not they fit into the system*

A GS-7 Survey Respondent

In addition to its important role in many organizational processes, job satisfaction is increasingly being viewed as an end in itself. Many organizations, both public and private, are beginning to recognize the social usefulness and humanitarian value of a satisfied workforce and its long-term effects on the success of the organization.

## What Do Federal Employees Think About Their Jobs?

Generally, the results of the 1992 MPS show that the Federal workforce consists of highly motivated and dedicated employees who are generally satisfied with their work and work environment. Table 3 shows that 72 percent were *satisfied with their jobs*, 79 percent said they *enjoy their work*, and 87 percent said they *put as much effort into their jobs as they possibly can*.

<sup>31</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "Federal Personnel Management Since Civil Service Reform," Washington, DC, November 1989.

<sup>32</sup> National Performance Review, op. cit., p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> For example: U.S. General Accounting Office, "Government Management Issues," Transition Series GAO/OGC-93-3TR, December 1992; and U.S. General Accounting Office, "Managing Human Resources: Greater OPM Leadership Needed to Address Critical Challenges," GAO/GGD-89-19, Washington, DC, January 1989.

<sup>34</sup> C. Ostroff, "The Relationship Between Satisfaction, Attitudes, and Performance: An Organizational Level Analysis," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, vol. 77, No. 6, pp. 963-974.

<sup>35</sup> R. Riley, Director of Customer Satisfaction for General Motors, cited in the National Performance Review, op. cit., p. 85.

## Job Satisfaction

**Table 3. Job Satisfaction Among Federal Employees, 1992**

Survey Statements	Percent Agree	Percent Neither Agree/Disagree	Percent Disagree
<b>Overall Job Satisfaction</b>			
In general, I am satisfied with my job	72	13	16
<b>Satisfaction With the Work and the Use of Skills</b>			
The work I do on my job is meaningful	87	7	6
I put as much effort into my job as I possibly can	87	8	6
Overall, I enjoy the work I do	79	12	10
I have considerable independence in how I do my work	76	12	13
My present job makes good use of my skills and abilities	69	10	21
My job is routine and repetitive	27	16	57
<b>Satisfaction With Supervisor, Work Site, Pay</b>			
Overall, I am satisfied with my supervisor	60	16	24
I am satisfied with the physical surroundings of my job	57	13	30
Overall, I am satisfied with my current pay	42	14	44
<b>Satisfaction With Government Work</b>			
I would recommend the Federal Government as a place to work	67	18	16
I will actively look for a job outside Government	11	17	72
Note: Percents may not total 100 because of rounding.			

Consistent with the research literature, this high level of motivation and general employee satisfaction with their jobs appears to be closely related to the nature and intrinsic rewards of the work itself. About 9 out of 10 Federal employees said that the work they do is meaningful (87 percent) and that they

have the skills to do their jobs (92 percent). Contrary to much conventional wisdom about Government work, over three-fourths (76 percent) of the employees reported having considerable independence in how they do their work, while just 27 percent found their jobs to be routine and repetitive.

Despite the high level of overall job satisfaction, not as large a percentage of employees were satisfied when we asked them about more specific aspects of their job. Some 60 percent were *satisfied with their*

*My organization is a good place to work. I have the freedom to do my job well. I would not discourage my kids from being civil servants.*

A GM-14 Supervisor

*immediate supervisor* and 57 percent were *satisfied with their physical surroundings*. Federal employees were least satisfied with their compensation, with fewer than half (42 percent) expressing *satisfaction with their current pay*.

Given the positive attitudes of Federal employees towards their jobs in general, it is not surprising that 67 percent said they *would recommend the Government as a place to work*. Simultaneously, only 11 percent indicated they would be *actively looking for a job outside the Government within the next year*.

Federal managers should continue to promote and maintain high levels of job satisfaction. In this time of major change, managers must remain particularly watchful that levels of job satisfaction do not erode to unacceptable levels. Managers are encouraged to listen carefully to their employees and become more fully aware of the issues and working conditions that satisfy or dissatisfy their employees. To the extent possible, they should promote conditions that enhance satisfaction and work closely with employees to identify and remove any unnecessary dissatisfiers that are barriers to their productivity and well-being. For example, can we make better use of the skills and abilities of employees who feel they are being underutilized? Can we reengineer some of the work that is currently being viewed as *routine and repetitive*?

In order to more fully understand the meaning of these findings, it is useful to compare job satisfaction levels over time and by different employee groups. Such comparisons help identify trends and employee groups who may have perceptions quite

different from those of the Federal workforce in general.

### Job Satisfaction Increased Slightly Since 1989

The 1992 level of job satisfaction (72 percent) increased just slightly over the level reported in 1989 (70 percent). However, this level is considerably higher than the 59 percent recorded in 1983, when we first asked employees about their job satisfaction. The overall pattern suggests that after an initial rise in job satisfaction during the early- to mid-1980's, job satisfaction levels seem to be leveling off.

In a comparison of levels of job satisfaction within agencies, figure 13 shows that virtually all of the increase in general job satisfaction since 1986 (the earliest year for which comparable data are available) is attributable to nondefense agencies closing the gap with defense agencies. While employees in

*The Government isn't using my knowledge and talents to the best of its ability. There are no challenges and no training to get ahead, so I just do my job. I wish it was different!*

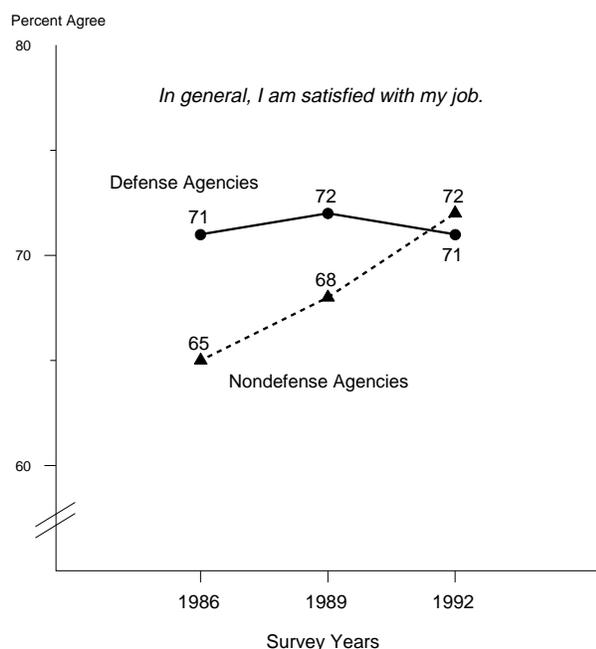
A WG-6 Blue-Collar Respondent

nondefense agencies had a significantly lower (65 percent versus 71 percent) level of job satisfaction than employees in defense agencies in 1986, this difference disappeared in 1992.

While most indicators of job satisfaction showed a leveling off between 1989 and 1992, one area of job satisfaction showed a dramatic increase. In 1989, just 49 percent of the Federal workforce said they *would recommend the Government as a place to work*. In 1992, this percentage increased to 67 percent—a rise of 18 percentage points. While no definitive conclusions are possible, there are several possible interpretations. For example, changes in the Nation's economy may have generally made the Government a more attractive employer compared

to the private sector, even when many Federal agencies were undergoing major budget cuts. In addition, Government policies and implementation of programs in such areas as flexitime, flexiplace, jobsharing, parental leave, dependent care, participative management, and greater workforce diversity may have begun to enhance the image of the Government as an employer.

**Figure 13. Trends in Employee Job Satisfaction: Defense and Nondefense Agencies**



Sources: MSPB Merit Principles Surveys, 1986, 1989, and 1992.

The increased perception of the Government as a good place to work also may have been influenced, in part, by expectation of increased compensation under the Federal Employees Pay Comparability Act of 1990. In 1986, 37 percent said that *pay was more a reason to stay than leave the Government*. In 1989, this dropped to 28 percent. In 1992, however, 42 percent of Federal employees said they are

*satisfied with their pay*. Although the survey questions are not identical, the comparison suggests that there has been an increase in employee satisfaction with pay. As expected, the satisfaction with pay was most evident among members of the SES, who received a major pay increase in 1991. Thus, while only 12 percent of the SES had rated *pay as a reason to stay* in 1989, 82 percent said they were *satisfied with their pay* in 1992—double the 1992 Governmentwide average for satisfaction with pay.

## Job Satisfaction Varies by Agency

Average levels of employee job satisfaction vary considerably among agencies and agencies differ in the way their employees' job satisfaction levels have changed from 1986 to 1992, as is shown in table 4. Generally, agencies with relatively high levels of employee job satisfaction in 1986 tended to maintain their relatively high levels of job satisfaction. These agencies included the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, the Departments of Justice, Transportation, and the Departments of the Interior, Army, Navy, and Air Force. Other departments and agencies, such as Education, Labor, Health and Human Services, and Housing and Urban Development, tended to remain below the Governmentwide average, even though they showed substantial increases, as will be discussed later in this section.

While the differences between agencies high and low in job satisfaction reflect real and meaningful differences in the levels of job satisfaction in those agencies, the job satisfaction levels for most agencies are intermediate, clustering between 69 and 74 percent. Differences among agencies within such a tight cluster have little practical significance. Moreover, any evaluation or interpretation of the job satisfaction level of an agency must consider the mission, size, occupational mix, workforce composition, and other characteristics of the agency involved. These and other factors are important factors in the level of job satisfaction that can be achieved within an agency.

**Table 4. Changes in Job Satisfaction Between 1986 and 1992 in Major Federal Agencies**

*In general, I am satisfied with my job. (Percent Agree)*

1986	1992	Department or Agency
68	72	<b>GOVERNMENTWIDE</b>
75	81	National Aeronautics and Space Administration
72	80	Transportation
66	76	Agriculture
62	76	Environmental Protection Agency
69	74	Interior
74	73	Army
69	73	Justice
68	73	Veterans Affairs
71	72	Air Force
66	72	Commerce
65	72	Energy
61	72	General Services Administration
75	71	Small Business Administration
69	70	Other Defense Department
60	70	Office of Personnel Management
55	70	Health and Human Services
70	69	Navy
64	69	Treasury
56	69	Housing and Urban Development
64	67	State
60	65	Labor
48	63	Education
68	68	Other Agencies

Note: Agencies are in rank order based on the 1992 data, except for the "Governmentwide" and "Other Agencies" averages.

## Job Satisfaction

While differences between agencies in levels of job satisfaction are not particularly noteworthy, it is more noteworthy how the job satisfaction levels of certain agencies have changed over time. While job satisfaction in some agencies, such as the defense agencies, changed little from 1986 to 1992, other agencies demonstrated remarkable increases in average levels of job satisfaction. For example, average job satisfaction levels in the Departments of Health and Human Services and Education increased 15 percentage points over the period, while the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the

*Employees who are in constant jeopardy of losing their jobs are not going to be as productive. They feel the Government has no loyalty to them, so they respond the same way. An employee is going to be as good as his or her employer.*

A WS-7 Blue-Collar Supervisor

General Services Administration showed 14-, 13-, and 11-point increases, respectively. These rates of increase are well above the Governmentwide average increase of 4 percent during the same time frame. The increases raise important questions about what management or policy changes, or external events may be related to the above-average increases in job satisfaction in these agencies.

We did not expect to see increases in job satisfaction for the defense agencies, and they didn't occur. First, these agencies already had relatively high levels of job satisfaction even in 1986, making further increases less likely. Second, the negative effects of planned and actual downsizing activities within the defense agencies were expected to decrease job satisfaction within these agencies, or at least offset any increases in job satisfaction there may have been.

While a lack of increase in employee job satisfaction in the major defense agencies in 1992 could be considered, in part, to reflect the cutbacks occurring in these agencies, the findings do not support the views of some that job satisfaction plummets when agencies initiate downsizing activities. While over 30 percent of defense agency employees indicated they *would be affected by a reduction-in-force (RIF) within the next year*, employees to be affected by a RIF were only slightly less satisfied (69 percent versus 74 percent) with their jobs than employees not to be affected by a RIF. However, employees to be affected by a RIF were twice as likely (20 percent versus 10 percent) to be *looking for a job outside the Government* and, not unexpectedly, were less likely (58 percent versus 68 percent) to *recommend the Government as a place to work*.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, we found relatively small differences in job satisfaction between employees who were likely to be *affected by a RIF* and those who were not likely to be *affected by a RIF*. Improvements in outplacement programs, buyouts, retraining, and other programs to soften the effects of downsizing may be partly responsible for helping maintain employee job satisfaction. Because the employees we surveyed were all gainfully employed, the condition of being employed during these economic times, in and of itself, may have enhanced the level of job satisfaction.

### Job Satisfaction Varies by Employee Group

In the previous sections we looked at Governmentwide job satisfaction levels and how these varied over time and among agencies. In this section we examine how job satisfaction differs by employee groups.

Since the antecedents of job satisfaction are often assumed to be within management's ability to influence, some have suggested that managers should perhaps employ different strategies to promote job satisfaction when different employee

<sup>36</sup> Witt and Nye, op. cit., pp. 910-917.

groups view job satisfaction differently.<sup>36</sup> Research has confirmed that different management strategies may indeed be useful when group differences exist, but it warns that such different strategies may lead to discrimination when group differences do not exist.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, it is important for managers to become more fully aware of major differences in the perceptions, attitudes, and opinions of different employee groups.

Members of the SES consistently were the most positive about their jobs compared to other pay or grade level groups. About 90 percent said they *enjoy the work they do*, and almost all (97 percent) considered their *work to be meaningful*. Such high levels of job satisfaction among members of the SES challenge the earlier predictions of a mass exodus

*Although I am an excellent secretary, I am bored and uninspired with my job now. I am going to college part time for a degree in accounting.*

A GS-7 Secretary

from the SES during 1994, when many SES members become eligible to retire with an annuity based on 3 salary years after the pay raise in 1991. This is consistent with similar challenges to the prediction of a mass exodus, such as the surveys of the SES conducted within the Departments of the Army and the Air Force.<sup>38</sup> Although economic factors play a significant role in why employees retire or quit, relatively few SES members are expected to leave Government to seek other employment—16 percent of SES members said they *plan to look for another job outside Government in the next year*.

Compared to the SES, nonsupervisory employees were the least satisfied employee group, while supervisors and managers in the merit pay system

(GM) were intermediate in their levels of job satisfaction. Of the nonsupervisors, employees in the lower grades (e.g., blue-collar and GS 1 through 6) were notably less satisfied with their jobs, their pay, the meaningfulness of their work, and the use of their skills than employees in the higher grades, as shown in figure 14. This difference may be as much the result of the kind of work assigned to employees in these grades as it is to grade level. For example, 47 percent of white-collar General Schedule (GS) employees in grades 1 through 6 found their jobs to be *routine and repetitive* compared to 21 percent of employees in GS grades 7 through 15. Nevertheless, employees in lower-graded GS jobs were as likely or more likely to *recommend the Federal Government as a place to work* than the average Government employee (73 percent versus 67 percent).

Blue-collar or wage grade (WG) employees, as a group, did not differ notably from the Governmentwide average in terms of their level of job satisfaction. Although a relatively high percentage of the blue-collar employees said their *jobs are routine and repetitive* (39 percent), and relatively few (56 percent) indicated they were *satisfied with their supervisors*, their *general satisfaction with their jobs* and *willingness to recommend the Government as an employer* were similar to the Governmentwide averages.

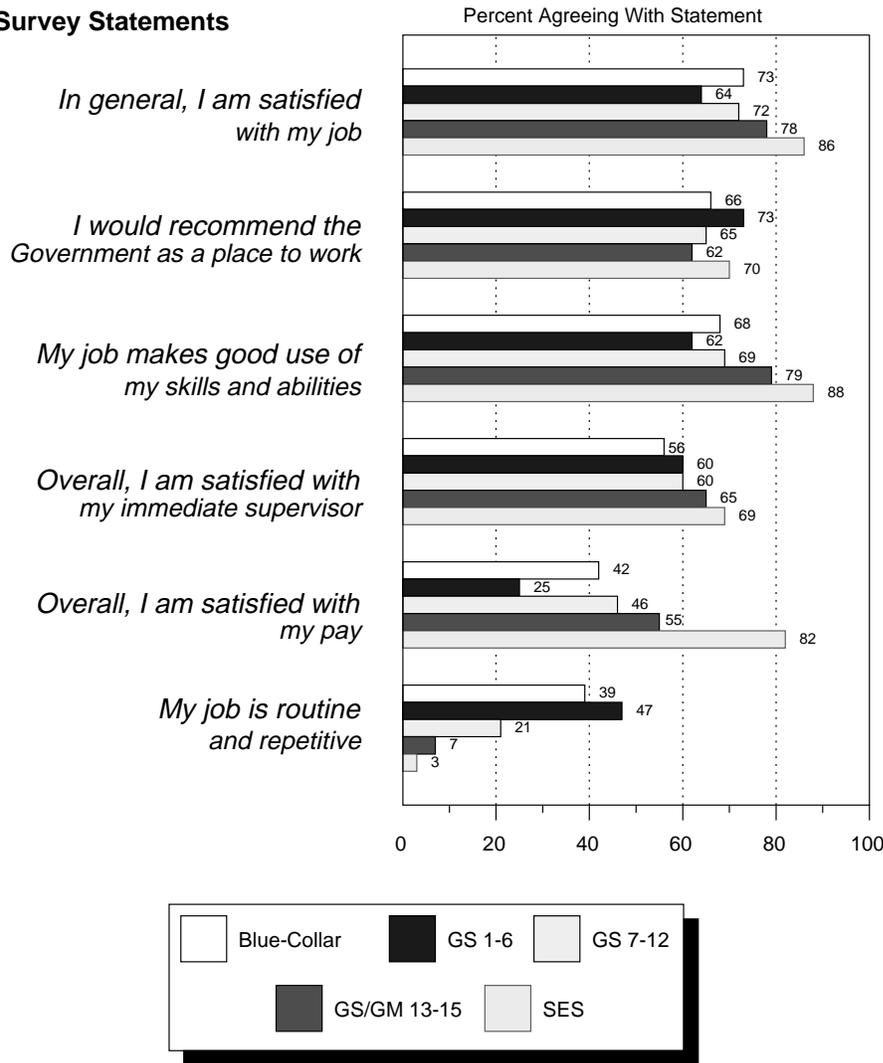
While there were few meaningful gender or minority/nonminority group differences in levels of general job satisfaction, there can be sizeable differences between these groups on some specific aspects of job satisfaction. For example, substantially more women than men (32 percent versus 24 percent) and more minority than nonminority group members (38 percent versus 24 percent) saw their jobs as *routine and repetitive*. Nevertheless, women and minority group members more often said they would *recommend the Government as a place to work*. While these findings in part reflect the

<sup>37</sup> N.S. Bruning and R.A. Snyder, "Sex and Position as Predictors of Organizational Commitment," *Academy of Management Journal*, 1983, vol. 26, pp. 485-491.

<sup>38</sup> *Federal Times*, "DOD News: Executive Exodus Overblown," Apr. 19, 1993.

**Figure 14. Variations in Job Satisfaction, By Grade Level Group and Pay Plan**

**Survey Statements**



Source: MSPB Merit Principles Survey, 1992.

service than in the private sector.<sup>39</sup>

The findings confirm that the dynamics of job satisfaction are complex and that many factors contribute to the job satisfaction differences between various employee groups. Gender, minority/nonminority group status, grade level, and occupation are among some of the major factors to consider in an analysis of employee job satisfaction levels. However, these factors tend to show their effects more on specific aspects of job satisfaction than on job satisfaction in general, particularly when two or more factors are considered simultaneously.

**Comparisons of Job Satisfaction With the Non-Federal Sector**

Although it would be useful to compare the job satisfaction levels of Federal employees with the levels found outside the Government, there are few meaningful or systematic comparisons.

occupational and grade-level differences between these groups, the findings also suggest that women and minority group members may perceive relatively better opportunities in the Federal civil

Even if identical survey questions and responses were used, interpretation of the findings must take into account the considerable differences between the Federal and non-Federal workforces.

<sup>39</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "Evolving Workforce Demographics: Federal Agency Action and Reaction," Washington, DC, November 1993, p. 22.

One example for comparison purposes was a 1991 survey of nearly 6,000 employees representative of U.S. employees by job level, union representation, all major industry sectors, and geographic location. In that study, 64 percent of the respondents indicated they were *satisfied with their present job*, 10 percent were *partly satisfied/partly dissatisfied*, and 26 percent were *dissatisfied*.<sup>40</sup>

Another study more directly compared job satisfaction levels between employees in the public (not necessarily Federal) and private sectors.<sup>41</sup> Contrary to predictions based on “bureaucrat bashing” and the nature of work in bureaucratic organizations, the public employees manifested significantly higher levels of job satisfaction than their private sector counterparts, except for those who were self-employed. Some 59 percent of the self-employed

said they *like their job very much*, compared to 52 percent of the public sector employees and 41 percent of the private sector employees. Again the survey question and responses used are not comparable to the MPS, and the survey sample was restricted to “early labor force participants,” averaging just slightly over 25 years of age.

These two examples highlight just some of the difficulties in making comparisons in the levels of job satisfaction between public and private sector employees. It is also apparent that more systematic public/private sector comparisons with identical job satisfaction questions would be useful in interpreting the current findings and trends. MSPB is currently making efforts to include one or more of its job satisfaction questions on nationwide employee attitude surveys.

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<sup>40</sup> The Wyatt Company, “Work USA: A National Benchmark Study on the Attitudes of the American Workforce,” Washington, DC, undated summary report of a 1991 survey, p. 11.

<sup>41</sup> U.S. Steel and R.L. Warner, “Job Satisfaction Among Early Labor Force Participants: Unexpected Outcomes in Public and Private Sector Comparisons,” *Review of Public Administration*, vol. 10, No. 3, pp. 4-22.

# Dealing with Poor Performance or Misconduct

Hundreds of employees in handwritten comments on the surveys wrote that their greatest source of frustration and dissatisfaction with their job comes from coworkers, supervisors, and managers who don't do their share of the work and who are getting a "free ride." These concerns were also heard by the NPR and resulted in the recommendations to improve the systems for dealing with poor performers and to reduce by half the time required to terminate employees for cause.<sup>42</sup>

Because employees with discipline and performance problems cause much disruption in the workplace and diminish the efficiency and effectiveness of Government service, we asked supervisors to what extent they have had to deal with problem employees in the last 2 years. Over half (55 percent) of the supervisors reported that they had had at least one problem employee in their unit during the past 2 years. This percentage continues the downward trend from the 64-percent incidence rate we found in 1986 and the 60-percent rate found in 1989. While this downward trend in the number of supervisors reporting problem employees is encouraging, the overall rate continues to be alarmingly high and translates into over 130,000 supervisors with problem employees.

The supervisors reporting problem employees said that almost half (47 percent) of the problems were performance only problems, 13 percent were misconduct problems, and 39 percent involved both performance and misconduct problems. This mixture is not substantially different from that reported for the 1989 Merit Principles Survey.

We asked supervisors with problem employees about the action(s) they took to deal with these employees. As shown in table 5, supervisors faced with problem employees most frequently counseled employees informally (86 percent). Much less often, supervisors referred employees to counseling services (20 percent), gave employees less than satisfactory

*I believe, as a manager, that one of the most important areas to be revised is the process to remove incompetent or nonperforming employees. It is far too difficult a process and it has overburdened the Government with employees who believe they cannot lose their job and are not accountable for the work they do.*

A GM-14 Supervisor

performance ratings (21 percent), placed employees on performance improvement plans (PIP's) (20 percent), and initiated formal action against the employee (26 percent).

Table 5 also shows that the actions taken in dealing with problem employees varied by the type of problem. For example, informal counseling was used more frequently with performance problems than misconduct problems (89 percent versus 74 percent). On the other hand, formal actions were initiated one-fourth as frequently for performance as for misconduct problems (12 percent versus 48 percent).

<sup>42</sup> National Performance Review, op. cit., p. 25.

## Dealing with Poor Performance or Misconduct

**Table 5. Actions Taken by Supervisors in Dealing With Problem Behaviors, 1992**

Types of Actions Taken	Types of Problem Behaviors			
	Percentage of Supervisors Taking the Action			
	All Behaviors	Poor Performance	Misconduct	Both Poor Performance and Misconduct
Counseled employee informally	86	89	74	90
Referred employee to a counseling service	20	12	26	33
Gave employee a less than satisfactory rating	21	26	4	22
Placed employee on a PIP	20	24	4	26
Initiated formal action against the employee	26	12	48	39

Notes: Because supervisors (with a problem employee) may have taken more than one action to deal with an employee's behavior problem, percents do not total to 100. "PIP" refers to Performance Improvement Plan.

In its report on the 1989 Merit Principles Survey, the Board found that up to 14 percent of the supervisors had been using personnel management actions that were intended for dealing with poor performance (i.e., less-than-satisfactory performance ratings and PIP's) to deal with misconduct problems.<sup>43</sup> In 1992, these actions were used in only about 4 percent of the misconduct cases. Supervisors may have become more aware that remedies designed solely to manage employee performance are not appropriate for dealing with misconduct problems.

Not all corrective actions were judged to be equally effective in dealing with problem employees. Table 6 shows that overall, *informal counseling* (54 percent) and *placing an employee on a PIP* (53 percent) were judged to *make things better* in slightly more than half of the

problem cases. As approaches for improving poor performance, *informal counseling* (58 percent) and *PIP's* (61 percent) were considered particularly effective. *Informal counseling* (57 percent) was also an effective remedy for improving the situation in misconduct cases, followed by *taking formal action* (51 percent) and *referrals to counseling services provided by the agency* (41 percent). Appropriately, *PIP's* and *less-than-satisfactory performance ratings* played little or no role in misconduct cases.

Managers and supervisors need to take a more active role in dealing with employees with problem behaviors. Clearly, problem behaviors continue to have a negative effect on the workforce and on the productivity of many work units. Agency managers may benefit from a closer look at the nature and

<sup>43</sup>U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "Working for America: A Federal Employee Survey," Washington, DC, June 1990, p. 20.

## Dealing with Poor Performance or Misconduct

**Table 6. Effectiveness of Actions Taken by Supervisors in Dealing With Problem Behaviors, 1992**

Types of Actions Taken	Types of Problem Behaviors			
	Percent Agreeing the Action Improved the Situation			
	All Behaviors	Poor Performance	Misconduct	Both Poor Performance and Misconduct
Counseled employee informally	54	58	57	44
Referred employee to a counseling service	30	28	41	31
Gave employee a less than satisfactory rating	29	36	—	18
Placed employee on a PIP	53	61	—	44
Initiated formal action against the employee	44	35	51	48

Notes: Because supervisors (with a problem employee) may have taken more than one action to deal with an employee's behavior problem, percents do not total to 100. "PIP" refers to Performance Improvement Plan.

effectiveness of the corrective actions being taken by their own supervisors. Managers should examine the entire work environment to ensure that behavioral problems are not due to system problems that are beyond the control of the so-called problem employee. If problem behaviors persist after system problems have been addressed, managers and supervisors need to take direct actions to improve employee behavior problems in their work units.

*Informal counseling* and *PIP's* are frequently effective and should be used for dealing with performance problems, as appropriate. However,

policymakers may wish to examine ways in which the effectiveness of these and other remedies may be improved. Since most supervisors and managers will have to deal with a conduct or performance problem at some time, agencies should make sure that all supervisors have adequate training and are fully prepared to deal competently and fairly with employees when problems arise. If needed, personnel office staff should be prepared to assist and work closely with supervisors to remedy problem situations and to promote efficient and effective use of the workforce.

# Views About the Work Environment

One of the merit principles calls for a Federal workforce that is used efficiently and effectively. One possible indicator of how efficiently and effectively the workforce is being used is to examine the views employees have of their organizations. When employees view their goals as being consistent with those of their organization and see their organization as facilitating their productivity, the chances are that we'll find an efficient and effective organization.

## Views About the Work Unit and the Organization

Although we reported earlier that Federal employees are quite satisfied with their jobs and that they are generally highly motivated, employees do not give their organization much credit for these attitudes. While figure 15 shows that about three-quarters of the employees believed their *work unit emphasizes doing the job right the first time* (76 percent) and that *unit customers are satisfied with the quality of the units' work* (74 percent), fewer than half (47 percent) of the employees indicated that their *organization does a good job communicating its policies and procedures*; just 50 percent of employees indicated that they *share the values of their organization*; and only 41 percent said their *organization inspires them to do well*.

A number of factors can influence employee perceptions of their organizations. Personnel and resource reductions are certainly among the factors that can

affect these perceptions. Given the extent to which agencies, particularly those in defense, have absorbed cutbacks in their budgets and in their personnel, it is useful to know to what extent

*In the last 2 years, the work in our field unit has increased 60 percent. We were already short of staff 2 years ago and have gotten no additional employees.*

A GS-10 Survey Respondent

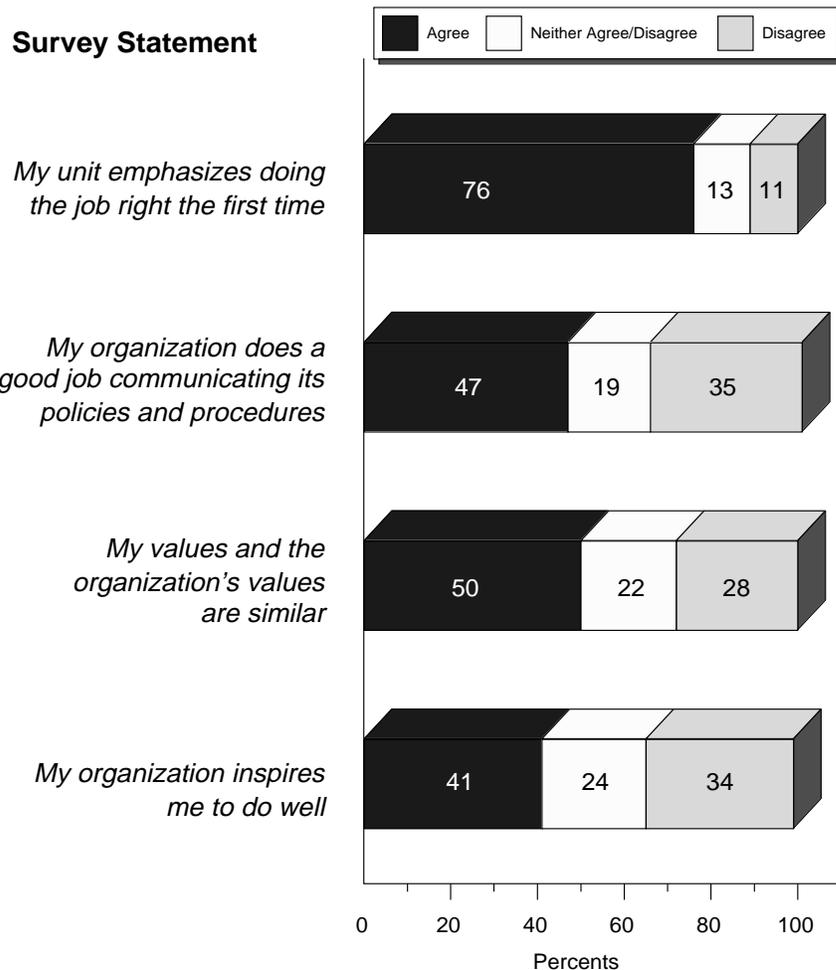
employees feel affected by the cutbacks. Overall, 22 percent of the respondents indicated they would *probably be affected by a reduction-in-force in the next year*. In the defense departments and among the Federal blue-collar workforce, this percentage typically exceeds 30 percent.<sup>44</sup>

## Views About the Workload

Without very careful workforce planning, workforce reductions can leave some work units with too many employees and other units with too few. When we asked employees about the workloads in their units, 43 percent of the employees said that their *unit had enough employees to accomplish its mission*. However, almost half (48 percent) *disagreed*, while the remaining 9 percent *neither agreed nor disagreed*.

<sup>44</sup> The 1992 study by MSPB of Federal blue-collar employees, cited in footnote 14, found that blue-collar employees are disproportionately affected by reductions in force—accounting for 71 percent of the RIF's in 1991.

**Figure 15. Employee Views of Their Work Unit and Their Organization**



Note. Percents do not total 100 because of rounding.  
Source: MSPB Merit Principles Survey, 1992.

numbers of Federal employees are facing considerable uncertainty about their job futures and many employees believe their unit does not have enough people to accomplish its mission. Managers should be fully aware that there may be real limits to the depths of cutbacks that some units can sustain over time. We encourage managers to ensure that all work performed serves the mission and that reductions in personnel are balanced by corresponding reductions in the work performed or improved efficiencies.

## Fair Treatment in Performance Management

Supervisors are required annually to assess the performance of their subordinates and there are few employees who have not had their performance appraised.

Consistent with the directives of the NPR to transform organizational structures, policymakers and managers need to systematically review their organizations' missions and workloads to ensure that there are sufficient numbers of trained people and that available personnel are used efficiently and effectively. These are steps that will be increasingly important as operations become more streamlined under specific initiatives to reinvent Government. The survey findings indicate that substantial

Although 31 and 39 percent of the employees said they had received *outstanding* or *exceeds fully successful* performance ratings, respectively – only 44 percent of the employees thought the procedures used to rate their performance were fair. Similarly, just 34 percent thought that *awards go to the most deserving employees*, while almost half (48 percent) thought they did not.

In 1988, the Board found a "consistent pattern of a higher percentage of women receiving *outstanding*

ratings than men.<sup>45</sup> That report called for tracking these differences (which occurred at all GS/GM grade levels) over an extended period of time. An examination of the results of our surveys showed that self-reported *outstanding* ratings increased dramatically between 1989 and 1992. However, the gender differences remained about the same. In 1992, 36 percent of women versus 28 percent of men said they had received *outstanding* performance ratings at their last appraisal. In 1989, 31 percent of women and 23 percent of men reported *outstanding* ratings. In each survey year, 8 percent more women than men reported receiving *outstanding* performance ratings.

MSPB's 1992 study of women and the glass ceiling found that among professional and administrative employees in grades 9 and above there were no practical differences in the average performance ratings of women and men.<sup>46</sup> While the performance ratings were comparable, the study found that women in professional occupations are promoted at a rate lower rate than men at two critical grades, GS 9 and GS 11. Results from a survey of employees currently in grades GS 9-15 and the SES

*Increasing budget cutbacks are causing incredible levels of tension, stress, and pressures to perform and produce without sufficient staff to do the work. Employees are burning out with increased expectations of job performance.*

A GS-6 Survey Respondent

*I received an "outstanding" performance rating last year and was told that even though I deserved and should receive one again this year, I could not be given an outstanding rating two years in a row. That is utterly ridiculous!*

A GS-5 Survey Respondent

confirmed that women have been promoted, on average, less often than men who have comparable amounts of formal education and experience, and who entered the Government at the same grade levels as the women.<sup>47</sup> The report concluded that greater efforts are needed to remove artificial barriers to the advancement of women and to counteract any discriminatory promotion practices.<sup>48</sup>

Performance ratings also need to be examined for differences among minority and nonminority groups. The 1992 MPS showed that while women generally reported receiving *higher* performance ratings than men, minorities reported receiving *lower* performance ratings than nonminorities. For example, 25 percent of minorities reported receiving outstanding ratings compared to 34 percent of nonminorities. Figure 16 shows that these performance ratings vary even more widely by gender within the minority and nonminority groups. For example, nonminority women reported receiving nearly twice as many (39 percent versus 20 percent) outstanding ratings as minority men. Minority women and nonminority men received intermediate percentages of outstanding ratings.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>45</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "Toward Effective Performance Management in the Federal Government," Washington, DC, July 1988, pp. 11-12.

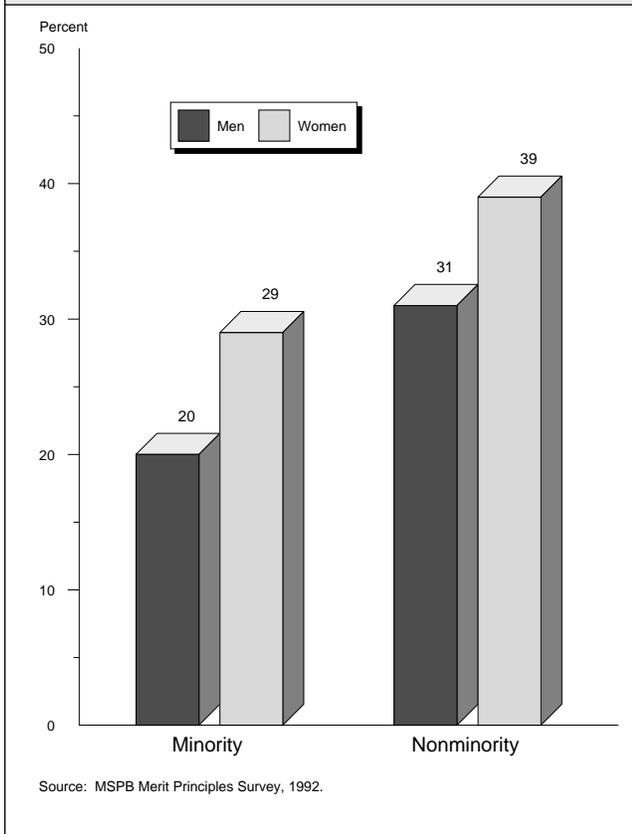
<sup>46</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "A Question of Equity: Women and the Glass Ceiling in the Federal Government," Washington, DC, October 1992, p. 18.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. x.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. xi.

<sup>49</sup> The Board is currently conducting a study to determine to what extent a glass ceiling impedes the career advancement of members of minority groups.

**Figure 16. Reports of "Outstanding" Performance Ratings: By Minority Status and Gender**



Although their form may change, performance appraisal ratings will continue to play a major role in employee perceptions of fair treatment. The NPR recognized this when it recommended that agencies should be allowed, in cooperation with employees, to design their own performance management systems. It recommended that performance management have a single goal: to improve the performance of individuals and organizations. As agencies redesign their performance management systems, they need to ensure the fairness of the procedures for all employees. The findings suggest there is room for improvement in this area.

## Participation in Partisan Politics

On October 6, 1993, President Clinton signed legislation that amended the Hatch Act to allow off-duty Federal employees greater freedom to engage in partisan political activity.<sup>50</sup> Both the 1989 and 1992 MPS showed that about 30 percent of the employees said they *would like to be able legally to be more active in partisan political activity*. About 40 percent of Federal employees had no clear preference for or against greater participation in partisan political activity, while the remaining 30 percent opposed greater participation. Members of the SES were least interested in (24 percent) and most opposed to (51 percent) being *more active in partisan political activity* and Congress specifically excluded them from the Hatch Act changes. Also excluded from the changes were employees in certain agencies such as MSPB, the Federal Election Commission, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Secret Service, and the Central Intelligence Agency.

In the past, violations of Hatch Act provisions were rare. Only about one-half of 1 percent of the survey respondents indicated that they had been *pressured by an agency official to engage in prohibited political activity in the past 2 years*. In the same time frame, fewer than 2 percent of employees indicated that they had been *pressured by an agency official to retaliate against or favor another person for political reasons*. MSPB will continue to monitor these prohibited practices to ensure that the greater freedom of Federal employees to participate in political activities does not adversely affect the implementation of merit principles.

## Perceptions of Problem Stress

One possible indicator of the effect recent and planned cutbacks may have had on the workforce is to examine employee responses to the question about job stress. Overall, half (49 percent) of the employees did not perceive the *amount of stress to be a problem for them*. However, 27 percent did and another 24 percent were not sure. The employee groups with some of the lower levels of problem

<sup>50</sup> Public Law 103-94.

stress were employees with less than 10 years of service (22 percent) and blue-collar nonsupervisory employees (21 percent). The employee group with one of the highest reported percentage of problem stress was that of first-line supervisors (33 percent), particularly blue-collar supervisors (36 percent).

*Being on phones 7 hours a day answering questions from the public is a tremendously stressful job, especially dealing with all kinds of people, some of whom are abusive. If they could adopt a system where one-half the day could be working with the public and the other half doing clerical work, the stress level would go down.*

A GS-5 Survey Respondent

The relatively high percentage of first-line supervisors reporting problem stress needs to be carefully tracked by agency managers. Managers and policymakers should examine levels of problem stress among their first-line supervisors to determine the scope of the problem and to identify its origins. For example, are the expectations and demands placed on first-line supervisors fair and realistic? Have first-line supervisors received the necessary training to deal effectively with the demands they face on the job? Prior studies, such as the MSPB first-line supervisor study, suggest they may not have received all of the needed training.<sup>51</sup>

### Knowledge About Employee Rights

A potentially important indicator about the health of the Civil Service is the extent to which agencies have informed employees of these rights and the extent to which Federal employees have learned their rights. To obtain more information about these issues, we asked employees (1) how much

they know about the actions they can take if their rights are violated, (2) if their agencies had specifically informed them of those rights, and (3) if they thought their rights would enable them to improve their situation to their satisfaction.

Less than one-half of the respondents indicated they knew *some* or *a lot* about the actions they could take if they were *retaliated against for whistleblowing* (33 percent), if they were *denied a job or promotion for nonmeritorious reasons* (39 percent), or if they were *treated unfairly* (46 percent). The percentages of first-line supervisors and the SES with these knowledges were about 15 to 30 percentage points higher than those for nonsupervisors, respectively.

While one-third to one-half of the respondents reported at least some knowledge about the actions they could take if they were treated unfairly, considerably fewer indicated that their agency had specifically informed them of their rights. Employees reported that agencies had told them of their rights in situations involving: *whistleblowing*, 21 percent of the time; *unfair selection/promotion*, 24 percent of the time; and *unjust discipline*, 30 percent of the time. These responses suggest that most agencies do not have adequate programs to educate employees about their rights and protections.

Given the relatively small percentage of employees aware of their rights, it was no surprise that employees were not very positive about the extent to which they thought their rights would improve their situation. About two-thirds of the employees indicated that the *improvements in their situation* would be *little* or *none at all* as a result of their protections from retaliation for whistleblowing, unfair selection/promotion, or unjust discipline. Less than one-fifth of the respondents said that they were *considerably* or *completely* confident that their situation would improve as a result of their protections.

<sup>51</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "Federal First-Line Supervisors: How Good Are They?" Washington, DC, March 1992.

## Views About the Work Environment

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It is clear that employees place relatively little confidence in their current rights and protections regarding whistleblowing, unfair selections/promotions, and unjust discipline. Again, while the issues directly affect relatively few employees, it should be of some concern to the Government as an employer that its employees place such little faith in their rights and protections. A greater effort to put

more teeth into employee protections and better dissemination of information about employee rights would help improve employee attitudes in this area. Only when employees feel more secure and protected from retaliation are they likely to take the risks to come forward and to call attention to wrongful or unfair activities directed towards themselves or towards others.

# Conclusions

The findings from this survey provide useful insights into the views of Federal employees in late 1992. They are particularly useful in the current climate of dramatic change in the scope and function of Government. We believe these views from the workplace, in conjunction with other findings, will be helpful to policymakers as they consider changes in priorities and policies affecting Federal employees. The Board advises agency managers to use the findings as a baseline against which to gauge the attitudes of their own employees and to stimulate further exploration and dialogue about the issues discussed in this report and to take corrective actions, as appropriate. Just as Federal agencies are encouraged to conduct customer service surveys, agency managers should be concerned about the attitudes and opinions of their employees. Knowing more about their employees' attitudes is a first step towards empowering employees and including employees in the change process. In particular, we encourage managers to learn more about the variations in attitudes among

different employee groups and, especially, to eliminate any remaining problems of discrimination and prohibited personnel practices.

*A follow-up is needed to get the full picture behind these survey responses.*

A GS-12 Survey Respondent

Although the findings generally reveal that the Federal civil service system is healthy, there are improvements that can be made. In their efforts to reinvent and reengineer Government, managers must constantly monitor the views and needs of all their employees, remove barriers to their productivity and well-being, and work collaboratively with all employees in providing more efficient and effective service to the American public.

**Appendix A: U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board  
1992 Merit Principles Survey**

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For a copy of this survey, please contact:

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