

Issues of Merit

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Director's Perspective

Federal HRM and Strategic Planning—Hit or Miss

Regardless of the differing views one may hear about the administrative requirements of the Government Performance and Results Act, there appears to be little disagreement with its underlying premise that a carefully thought-out strategic plan is a sound idea. Articulating where—and what—an organization should be five years from now, and then identifying the best strategies for getting there, simply makes good sense. True, this is much easier said than done, when so many pressures keep managers focused on their immediate problems and immediate needs. A disproportionate emphasis on the short term versus the long is especially troubling in federal human resources management where effective recruitment, selection, and development of a high quality workforce sometimes seems to be an after-thought rather than a primary objective.

It's refreshing, therefore, to find that in their strategic plans, most federal departments and agencies make at least some mention of the role that human resources management initiatives will play in how their organizations plan to meet their strategic objectives. Thanks to the internet, it's possible to view the plans for at least 26 major agencies at their agency websites. For those who are interested in more details about those plans, a handy resource is the website maintained as a free service by *Government Executive* magazine (www.govexec.com). That website's "reinvention center," contains links not only to the strategic plans for most of the major departments and agencies, but also to the most recent General Accounting Office review of each plan

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OPE Focus on the Facts

Belief:

Because they are needed to administer federal downsizing and reduction-in-force efforts, and to handle delegated personnel authorities, the number of personnelists employed government-wide has remained relatively stable.

Fact:

Between 1992 and 1997, the number of personnel specialists, assistants, and clerks in the federal government decreased by some 21 percent, from about 51,000 to 40,000 employees.

Supervisors Rate Their Personnel Offices

In a recent survey, we asked over 2,600 supervisors from all over the federal government to rate the advice and service they receive from their personnel offices. The survey respondents were generally positive about the service they receive: 61 percent reported that the overall quality of personnel services provided was either somewhat or very good. About one-fifth (22 percent) reported that the overall service provided was poor.

The supervisors also gave their personnel offices high marks for the advice and service they give on time, attendance, and leave issues; staffing issues; and labor-management relations. However, as the figure on the next page shows, the supervisors who responded to our survey were less positive about the quality of service and advice they get from personnel on reorganization and downsizing.

We found similar patterns of responses when we asked the supervisors to rate their personnel offices on the timeliness of the advice and service they receive.

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and, where available, the agency's related FY 1999 performance plan.

It's clear from a casual review of the published strategic plans that the inclusion of workforce issues and human resources management as part of the overall strategic planning process is a real hit or miss affair. For example:

- The amount of attention paid to workforce issues in the 26 strategic plans that we reviewed ranges from none (one agency) to a 12-page list of specified HRM objectives, strategies for achieving those objectives, and performance measures tailored for each major organizational subcomponent (Department of Agriculture)
- Twenty-four of these 26 strategic plans identified at least one specific HRM objective and one or more

implementing strategies, but fewer than half of those 24 plans included performance measures that could be used to assess whether the objectives were being met.

- The military departments and the Department of Energy list specific workforce reduction numbers as strategic HRM goals although the reductions are not directly linked to improved mission accomplishment.
- Recruitment and development of a highly qualified workforce and workforce diversity were articulated goals or strategies in approximately half of the plans. Of the two goals, only workforce diversity tended more often than not to be associated with performance measures, and these measures related to degree of representation.
- Labor-management partnerships, frequently associated with

reinvention initiatives, are mentioned in only a few plans.

If these strategic plans are any indication, HRM is not universally recognized as a critical ingredient in the achievement of federal agencies' GPRA-related strategic goals. If federal departments and agencies are going to devote time and effort to the development of five-year strategic plans, they should seriously consider the critical importance of their workforce to their agencies' achievements and include meaningful HRM goals, strategies and measures in their plans. While it certainly will not be easy, particularly with regard to devising practical measures, it seems a shame not to try.

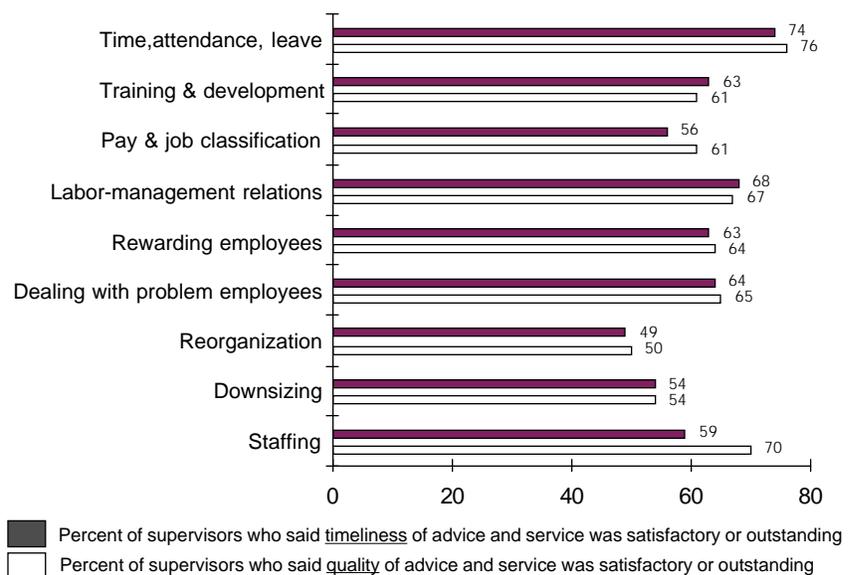
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Personnel Offices Rated *(continued from page 1)*

The supervisors were most positive about timeliness in the areas of time, attendance, and leave; labor-management relations; and performance management issues. They were less positive about the timeliness of service and advice on reorganization activities, pay and job classification, and downsizing. But in all these areas except one, the supervisors rated timeliness at about the same level as they rated quality. The single exception is in the area of staffing. Here, supervisors were positive about quality, but less so about timeliness. This finding is consistent with the conventional wisdom (filling jobs takes too long) and also with findings from an earlier

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Supervisors' views of timeliness and quality of personnel office support



Source: 1997 MSPB Survey of Current Managers and Supervisors

survey of our standing panel of managers (reported in the November 1997 *Issues of Merit*) in which supervisors and managers were asked to recall incidents of particularly outstanding or particularly poor support from their personnel office. More than half of those survey participants cited incidents concerning staffing for both the good and bad categories.

U.S. and Canada Tackle Similar HR Challenges

U.S. civil servants aren't alone in grappling with how to deal with accountability for human resources in a manage-by-results environment. Their counterparts in Canada's National Public Service are also facing that challenge as the Canadian government shifts its focus from process to results. An MSPB Office of Policy and Evaluation staff member who recently completed a two-month detail to the Canadian government's central staffing agency, the Public Service Commission of Canada (PSC), reports that Canadian public servants currently are busy identifying measures to allow annual reporting to Parliament on the results that Canadian citizens are receiving for the taxes and fees they pay.

Our Canadian neighbors are spending considerable effort on benchmarking other countries, including Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, Finland, and the United States. Most of the focus to date has been on identifying measures for the business lines—the services that the departments and agencies deliver. As the central staffing agency in a country where staffing authority is being delegated extensively after a lengthy period of incremental delegation, the PSC is concerned with identifying measures that will demonstrate the value the staffing community

adds to mission accomplishment. But it also is concerned with how to hold departmental officials accountable for the staffing decisions that they are now making in a new, decentralized world.

The range of issues facing the PSC—and Canadian managers in general—should sound familiar to their U.S. counterparts. The issues include

- Determining what and how to measure, especially when so much that is important in staffing is unquantifiable, while much that is quantifiable is of limited importance;
- Matching skills and job needs in a changing environment. Both staffing specialists and managers who “grew up” in the old environment may find it difficult to adapt to the new way of doing things. Some may even find it impossible.
- Providing line managers good HR tools, and proper training in their use, so that those managers can assume their new, expanded role with confidence.
- Finding the right balance between attention to process and measuring results, since sometimes the process followed is critical to certain expectations of government HR activities, such as fairness and employment equity.
- Getting departments to commit the necessary resources to carry out a self-assessment role as part of a multi-tiered accountability system.

This last point highlights a difference between the Canadian

and U.S. systems. In Canada delegation of staffing authority is rapidly expanding, and the accountability system is being developed to keep up with that delegation. Since the delegation flows from the PSC, the accountability system will ensure that the departments report to the PSC on their staffing activity—and are held

So much that is important in staffing is unquantifiable, while much that is quantifiable is of limited importance.

accountable to the PSC for their activity. In turn, the PSC is accountable to Parliament for the agencies' actions. Thus, in Canada a multi-tiered approach is being devised which has links between each department's program and that of the PSC. And finally, because public service unions have a stronger role in Canada than in the U.S., departments are encouraged to develop their parts of the accountability system in consultation with unions.

Panel Surveys Focus on Partnerships

To help reform government and to promote more collaborative labor-management relationships, President Clinton in 1993 ordered agencies to establish formal labor-management partnerships to “champion change” in federal agencies. To get an idea how this initiative is working, we recently surveyed our standing panels. (The panels are composed of about 1,800 managers and supervisors, over 2,000 HRM professionals, and nearly 550 federal union representatives who have agreed to

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Coming Soon
Civil Service Evaluation
The Evolving Role of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management

Look for this report early this summer

periodically share their opinions on HRM issues.) This time our questions had to do with the extent to which formal partnerships were being established and how much the partnerships have influenced the working relationships between supervisors and union representatives. We found that:

- Both supervisors and union representatives believe that their relationships generally are cooperative and that their working relationships have improved over the last two years.

- Most respondents work in organizations that have formal labor-management partnerships; but the level of participation by the three types of respondents varies widely. Participation in formal partnerships is highest among union representatives, while it is lowest among first-line supervisors. This is not unexpected, since union representatives have a good chance of being on a partnership committee, while first-line supervisors must typically rely on having their points of view represented by higher-level managers. The level of participation for labor relations specialists on our panel falls somewhere in between that of first-line supervisors and union representatives.

- Partnerships have improved relationships between management and unions. About one-third of the supervisors and over half of the union representatives and employee relations specialists said that formal partnerships had “Greatly Improved” or “Somewhat Improved” the relationships.

Four years after the executive order that created them, formal partnerships appear to have taken root in many parts of the federal workplace. While we don’t know the extent to which our standing panels’ views reflect those of the larger workforce, it is encouraging that at least among our survey respondents, working relationships between management and unions

have improved. And panel members credit formal partnerships with some of that improvement.

SF 171: Not Gone, Not Forgotten

Whether you hated its length or loved its comprehensiveness, the standard form 171 was—until January 1995—the only job application form you could submit to federal personnel offices to be considered for employment. When the form was withdrawn as a requirement, applicants for federal jobs were permitted to use any application format they chose. Today, applicants submit resumes, the new optional form 612 (a non-mandatory replacement for the SF 171), or the SF 171 itself, which is still permitted, though personnel offices can’t require it.

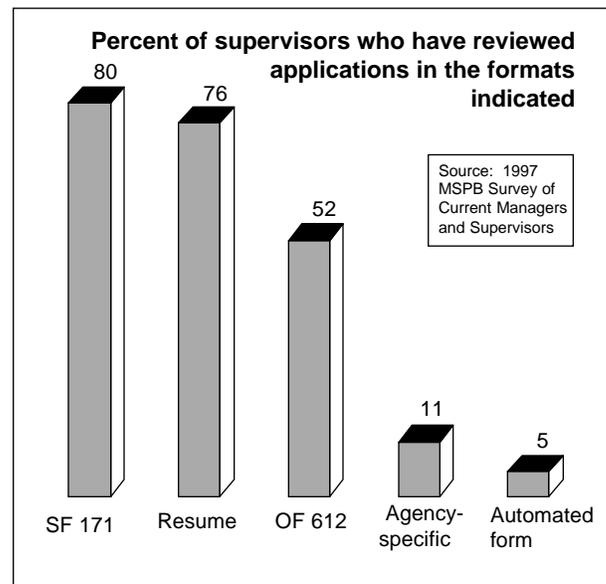
The freedom of choice in application forms that job candi-

More than half of the supervisors said they would prefer a single prescribed form.

dates now enjoy is a result of the National Performance Review’s push to make the Government’s application process more customer-friendly. And if the percentage of supervisors who have been receiving non-171 applications is any indication, the use of resumes and other forms has caught on, although the SF 171 has by no means disappeared. In a recent survey, we asked federal managers

and supervisors about the application formats they had reviewed since December 1994. As the chart below shows, nearly as many survey respondents reported that they had reviewed resumes (76 percent) as SF 171s (80 percent).

Whether or not supervisors are pleased that applicants have these flexibilities is another story. The



initiative seems to be one that does make life easier for applicants, but not necessarily for supervisors, managers, and others who must review these job applications. More survey respondents agree than disagree that abolishment of the SF 171 has made it easier for candidates to apply for jobs (46 versus 18 percent). At the same time, however, only about a fifth (19 percent) of the supervisors and managers surveyed agree that abolishing the 171 has made it easier to review candidates’ qualifications. Items of information included in a resume vary from applicant to applicant, and the information is not consistently displayed, making the review process without the 171 more time-consuming. Also, applicants sometimes fail to provide information (such as citizenship status) that is essential to determining their

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eligibility for employment. It is not surprising, therefore, that more than half (59 percent) of supervisors said they would prefer a single prescribed form or format for job applications.

These supervisors' preferences might in some sense be satisfied as automation transforms the way personnel offices function. More and more agencies are automating their recruitment operations to make it easier to track, organize, store, and retrieve applications. And automation is also changing how people apply for jobs. There are some places where machines are the first "eyes" to review applications and where "format" has taken on a new meaning. Typically, in such a setting, some kind of prescribed format is required for machine readability. Our survey results indicate that five percent of supervisors have reviewed automated applications. Although the other paper formats will not completely disappear any time soon, the use of electronic applications will likely increase as agencies apply technology to improve or streamline recruitment operations.

Filling Jobs—What Do Supervisors Look For?

Ever wonder how a supervisor decides which candidate is the

best choice to fill a vacancy? When making these decisions federal supervisors usually consider many factors. But how important are these various factors in the final hiring decision? To explore this question, we surveyed over 2,600 federal supervisors, asking them to review a list of about 15 factors that might go into a selection decision. These factors included some very quantifiable information, such as documented qualifications and written test scores, and also covered some fairly subjective information

such as how the supervisor believes the candidate would contribute to the diversity of the unit, or how well the person would fit in with other members of the unit. Survey participants rated these factors according to whether they

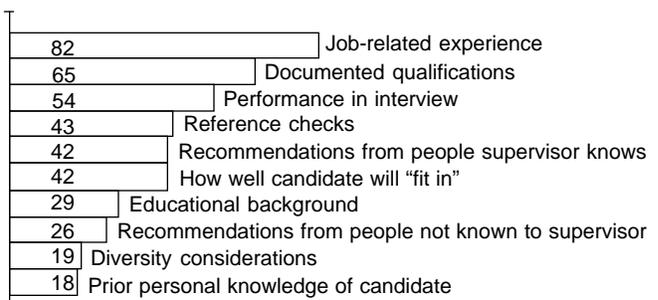
are very important, somewhat important, not at all important, or not applicable in their work units, when hiring from within the government and from outside the government.

According to these supervisors, the most important factor in selecting an employee for a vacancy—whether from within or

outside the government—is the candidate's job-related experience (see charts below). Second on the list are the documented qualifications of the candidate. Recommendations from people the supervisor knows are third in importance when internal candidates are being considered, and how well candidates do in an interview is the number three factor for supervisors considering outside candidates.

As for factors that don't appear to influence selection decisions,

Factors supervisors rated very important in considering outside candidates for vacancies

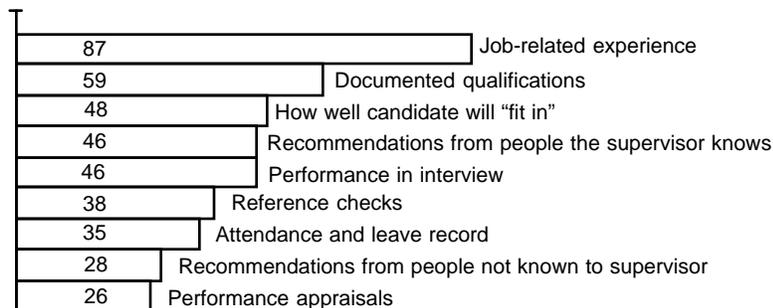


Percentage of supervisors who rated the indicated factor "very important"

Source: 1997 MSPB Survey of Current Managers and Supervisors

these supervisors told us that the current salary level of the candidate is at the bottom of the list for both internal and external candidates (identified as not at all important by 68 percent of supervisors when they consider internal candidates and 62 percent when they consider external candidates). Provisions of negotiated union contracts and the advice of the personnel office also play only a very minor role in most supervisors' decisions. When current federal employees are being considered for a job, the length of the candidates' federal service plays a fairly insignificant role. And when candidates from outside the government are being considered for a job, the school that the candidates attended is among the least important of the factors, according to supervisors who participated in the survey.

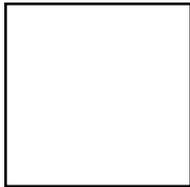
Factors supervisors rated very important in considering current federal employees for vacancies



Percentage of supervisors who rated the indicated factor "very important"

Source: 1997 MSPB Survey of Current Managers and Supervisors

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