insights & analyses for Federal human capital management

Issues of Merit

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Too Much Information?

Using online search engines to vet applicants during the selection process may seem like a good idea, but there are some potential pitfalls.

Mr. Smith was at his desk looking at the certificate of eligibles for the opening he had in his IT department. Three applicants in the "best qualified" group struck him as being particularly outstanding candidates and were being scheduled for interviews. Mr. Smith, being tech savvy, decided to "google" these applicants to see if he could find more information about them before the interview. He was interested in finding the best qualified candidate and thought there may be pertinent information about them in the public domain.

The first candidate had designed a family Web site, with pictures of and news about family events. She displayed photos of her two small children and noted that her husband had been traveling frequently on business. Mr. Smith became concerned because this position required a fair amount of travel. If this candidate were selected, it appeared to him that she may not be free to travel because of family commitments.

He "googled" the second candidate and found several news stories from the local paper that named the applicant as a suspect in an Internet fraud scheme. It would obviously not be appropriate to employ an individual in a Federal IT position who had that kind of history.

The third candidate had created a blog on MySpace.com in support of Presidential candidate John Nelson. While Mr. Smith recognized that Federal employees in his agency are permitted to campaign for partisan candidates, he had heard some things about this particular candidate that concerned him. Now that he knew of the applicant's support for the candidate, it would be hard to forget.

Millions of people "google" everyday. When you want to find information about a friend or a colleague or a potential suitor, it has become almost second nature to run their name through an online search engine or look them up on social network sites such as Facebook or MySpace. "Googling" applicants prior to selection may sound like a good idea, but your organization may want to think twice about actually doing it. While you may learn interesting facts about the applicants' qualifications, you may also discover things you should not be considering as part of the selection process.

As described in the previous scenarios, there are several pitfalls to using online searches to inform selection decisions. First, the selecting official may find information he is not permitted to know about the candidates. He might learn their race or national origin, their

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The MSPB Office of Policy and Evaluation conducts studies to assess the health of Federal merit systems and to ensure they are free from prohibited personnel practices.

Issues of Merit
We offer insights and analyses on topics related to Federal human capital management, particularly findings and recommendations from our independent research.

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Contact us at:
www.mspb.gov
(click on "MSPB Studies")
STUDIES@mspb.gov
202-653-6772 x1350
1-800-209-8960
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U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board
Office of Policy and Evaluation
1615 M Street, NW
Washington, DC 20419

DIRECTOR'S PERSPECTIVE

Human Capital Remains High-Risk: Let's Not Lose the Momentum

The next Administration and Congress need to continue emphasizing workforce planning, hiring, and accountability.

During the past several years there has been both an increased awareness of the need to staff the Federal workforce with high-quality personnel and an increased emphasis on assessing the performance of Federal agencies. It is particularly important that both of these efforts are continued by the next Administration and Congress. Otherwise, the Government risks becoming increasingly unable to meet the needs of the American public.

There will be many issues that may be seen as higher priorities, such as the economy, health care, food safety, and the war in Iraq. However, the Federal workforce and the work it performs has a direct impact on these and other important issues. Therefore, the new Administration and Congress should continue to focus on several key workforce management issues, including workforce planning, hiring, and accountability.

In many ways, the attention being paid to the Federal workforce reached a turning point when the Government Accountability Office placed "strategic human capital management" on its high-risk list. When this occurred, leadership in Congress and the White House began to take seriously the problems of how to best manage the workforce—particularly in terms of how to obtain the best replacements for the baby boomer employees who would soon be retiring.

This anticipated retirement wave has important implications not only in terms of finding good replacements for the employees who will be leaving, but also in terms of transferring and retaining the critical institutional knowledge these employees possess. Although retirements may not yet be occurring in the numbers that were initially predicted, they are ultimately inevitable. Within 5 to 10 years, half of the current workforce will likely be gone. Therefore, Government leaders should work together to ensure that the Federal workforce maintains a high-quality, knowledgeable workforce throughout this retirement wave.

Unfortunately, current Federal hiring processes put the Government at a competitive disadvantage when it comes to competing with other organizations that also need highly able employees. Federal processes are simply too slow, too complex, and too unfriendly to potential applicants. This problem is only likely to get worse as the pool of capable talent shrinks, while the need for this talent increases.

Fortunately, some traction is beginning to be made on this issue. Hearings have been held by the Senate Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia concerning how to improve the hiring process. Additionally, both the Office of Personnel Management and the Chief Human Capital Officers Council have been looking at this issue, as well as many other members of the public administration community. Hopefully the initiatives that have begun on this issue will not be lost when new policy objectives are undertaken by a new President and Congress.

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Director's Column

(continued from page 2)

In addition to improving the hiring process, the next Administration and Congress need to continue focusing on ways to engage and motivate members of the Federal workforce. This includes recognizing the role that Federal employees play in delivering important services to the public and re-branding the Government as an employer of choice in the eyes of the public. It also includes holding employees accountable for the quality of the work they perform. Polls show that the public's view of the Federal workforce has suffered. Positive recognition, re-branding, and accountability can help rectify that view.

Finally, the Clinton Administration's National Performance Review and the Bush Administration's Management Agenda both attempted to hold organizations responsible for results, and not just processes. It is critical that this accountability trend continue. Even if the current scorecard approach used by the Office of Management and Budget goes away, the public and its elected officials have the right to hold agencies and public servants accountable for the performance of public programs. The next Administration and Congress can make effective decisions only if they can determine which programs are working as they were intended and which are not spending the public's dollars wisely. This is important not only for budgeting purposes but because of its potential to improve agency operations by focusing attention on desired outcomes.

While the problems discussed above have not been resolved, there has been an acknowledgement of the seriousness of the issues and efforts have been made to begin to deal with them. It is important that, despite the many significant policy issues that will need to be addressed over the next several years, the next Congress and Administration continue efforts to stave off any impending human capital crisis so that Federal programs can serve the public as effectively as possible. ❖

John Crum
Director, Policy and Evaluation

Please join the Merit Systems Protection Board in congratulating Dr. John Crum on his selection as the Director of the Office of Policy and Evaluation. John previously served as the Deputy Director and will continue his valuable contributions to MSPB's research and evaluation work.

The Times are Changing…Mostly for the Better

The Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) looks at survey trends over the past 25 years.

Federal employees are a diverse group whose workplace perceptions reflect the dynamic changes taking place in their local work environment, within their agency as a whole, and across society in general. MSPB conducted the Governmentwide Merit Principles Survey (MPS) 8 times between 1983 and 2007, gathering impressions about supervision, fairness, recognition, job/work satisfaction, discrimination, and prohibited personnel practices. Examining the data from a historical perspective helps us see trends and patterns that illustrate how we have and have not changed across the years and perhaps anticipate where we may be heading.

In an upcoming report, MSPB compares results from one survey administration to the next and finds that some employee impressions have changed more than others. The impression employees hold as to whether their "opinions count" has shown the least change, remaining stable at about 55 percent in 1996, 2000, and 2005. On the other hand, Governmentwide pay satisfaction showed the greatest increase, up from 28 percent in 1989 to 60 percent in 2005—an increase of 32 percentage points. Other big improvements include:

- Recommending the Government as a place to work was up 27 percentage points since 1989;
- Agreement that performance standards are fair was up 22 percentage points since 1992; and
- Agreement that rewards are based on merit was up 16 percentage points since 1992.

There are areas where we still need to improve. For instance, the perception from employees that they need more training is up 16 percentage points, reflecting the increased demands from more technical, knowledge-based work environments and decreased training budgets.

Across the years, we have seen positive shifts in employees' impressions of how well the Federal workforce is being managed. However, more progress is needed as we work to make the Government a model employer. ❖

Which Authority Did I Use to Hire This Person?

A recent MSPB report finds that selecting officials often do not know which hiring authority was used to appoint their new hire and explains why this matters.

The Federal Government uses literally hundreds of different legal appointing authorities to hire job candidates. Each separate authority defines who can be hired, how the hiring occurs, and what responsibilities result for the agency, the supervisor, and the new hire. Our recent report, *Federal Appointment Authorities: Cutting through the Confusion*, is based on a MSPB survey of Federal supervisors about how they use the different hiring authorities.

With so many authorities having different rules—including post-hire obligations the Government has for new employees—supervisors' ability to use the authorities effectively can be hampered by confusion about them. Our study focused on the four most-used authorities—Competitive Examining, Veterans Employment Opportunity Act, Federal Career Intern Program, and Veterans Recruitment Appointment—which combined, accounted for two-thirds of new hires. Each authority has different rules regarding the assessment process, length of the probationary/trial period, or training requirements.[1]

We asked supervisors to identify the hiring authorities that were used to appoint their new hire. The outcome varied by hiring authority, but overall we found that 36 percent of supervisors who were involved in the hiring decision did not know which hiring authority was ultimately used to bring the applicant on board. We found that this confusion caused misunderstandings regarding the length of the new hire's probationary or trial period, potentially hampering the ability of the supervisors to use that period effectively. Furthermore, 43 percent of supervisors involved in the hiring process reported that no one discussed with them the training or assessment responsibilities that may be associated with the hiring authorities they considered using—making it difficult for them to meet their training and assessment obligations.

Knowing which authority was used is key to knowing if the new hire is in a probationary/trial period and its length. Therefore, while supervisors have a responsibility to fully utilize the probationary/trial period, human resources staffs have a responsibility to communicate with supervisors so they are aware of what their responsibilities are, based on the particular hiring authority used. Ultimately, recruitment and staffing specialists, management-employee relations specialists, and supervisors all need to work together to ensure that a new hire's probationary or trial period, including assessment and training requirements, is managed effectively and in the best interest of the individual and the agency. ❖

[1]See the new report for a more in depth discussion of what these differences entail. The report can be downloaded at www.mspb.gov.

Fast Facts From: *Federal Appointment Authorities: Cutting through the Confusion*

What are the four most-used Governmentwide hiring authorities?

- Competitive Examining
- Veterans Employment Opportunity Act (VEOA)
- Federal Career Intern Program (FCIP)
- Veterans Recruitment Appointment (VRA)

How does the use of Competitive Examining compare to other authorities?

Within the past decade, Competitive Examining accounted for approximately 50% of all new hires.

In FY 2005, VEOA and FCIP combined exceeded the use of Competitive Examining.

What impact does being involved in the decision to hire have in supervisory satisfaction with the new hire?

Supervisors involved in the hiring process were more likely to be "very satisfied" (80%) with the quality of the new hire than supervisors not involved in the decision (71%).

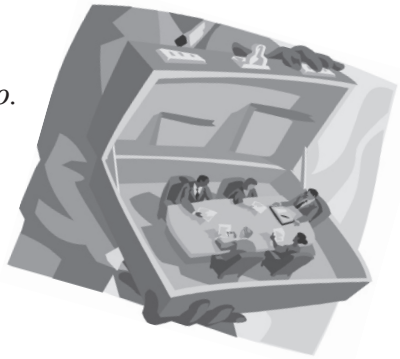
Supervisors involved in the decision to hire were more likely to have had discussions about their responsibilities under the hiring authority (69%) than supervisors not involved in the decision (61%).

What percent of the 2,400 supervisors responding to our survey were not involved in the actual decision to hire?

44 %

Realistic Job Previews

Help applicants to screen themselves out of the job before you have to.



Have you ever accepted what you thought would be a great job only to discover that the real job did not match its description? A realistic job preview (RJP) may have spared you—and the employer—from a bad fit.

What RJPs Are. RJPs are a recruiting tool that provide potential job applicants with an accurate description of the job and its organizational context. The goal is to describe the "truth" about the job rather than present a purely positive scenario, so people understand both the advantages and disadvantages of a job before they apply for or accept it. The objective of RJPs is to decrease applications from people who are not likely to thrive in the position while increasing applications from those most likely to succeed. Because they enhance the likelihood of a good job-person fit, RJPs can significantly increase retention, job productivity, and job satisfaction.[1]

A good job preview will include specific, accurate information about the job responsibilities, working conditions, the competencies (knowledge, skills, abilities, and behaviors) needed to succeed, how performance is assessed and rewarded, development and advancement opportunities, and interactions with co-workers or the public. The preview will make an honest effort to provide a balanced view.

What Value They Provide. RJPs are especially valuable for jobs in which potential applicants may lack an accurate understanding of the demands of a job. For example, many employees aspire to become supervisors because it entails a promotion and pay increase but few understand how difficult the job is. An RJP can alert them to the major challenges of transitioning from frontline worker or technical expert to supervising others.

For jobs with unusual requirements that may affect the candidate's personal life—such as long working hours, extensive travel, or relocation—it is important to lay out these considerations so the applicant can understand the demands, as well as the rewards of the job.

How They Can Be Presented. Realistic job previews can be presented in several formats. Videos are a popular and effective method. A video takes viewers on a guided tour of a typical day on the job either in employees' own words or through a narrator. Real employees are shown performing common tasks and engaged in interactions with others.

Classroom or on-line training modules are other effective formats for RJPs. For example, aspiring supervisors learn from current supervisors what supervision entails including the difficult decisions, demanding personal interactions, pressures, and frustrations that accompany the job. At the conclusion of the module, participants decide if supervision is a good choice for them. In some organizations, candidates must complete an RJP module before they can apply for supervisory positions.

Blogs can also provide "day in the life" information for jobs. Current employees describe their life at work, their assignments, and the situations they encounter. The organization reviews the content before it is posted but encourages employees to include discussions of the pros and cons of their jobs. Not only do potential applicants develop a realistic understanding of the jobs but they also get a glimpse of future co-workers. Some blogs provide links to videos with more extensive information.

RJPs on a Tight Budget. Inexpensive RJPs can be provided by including in the application materials both an accurate and full job description and a chart describing what the job is and isn't. For example, MSPB has used a two-column chart, with one column headed, "This job might be for you if…" and the other column titled, "This job might <u>not</u> be for you if…" There were corresponding characteristics of the job described in each column, such as "This job might be for you if you like working on long-term projects, enjoy writing research-based publications, etc."

Another simple approach to conducting RJPs is ensuring that interviewers spend time discussing different aspects of the job—including both the positives and negatives—so applicants can make informed decisions as to whether the job is a good fit for them.

Though it may seem counter-intuitive, both the agency and individual benefit in terms of saved effort and resources when applicants screen themselves out of the job competition if they do not feel they are a good match. RJPs provide that opportunity. ❖

[1] For instance, see Schermerhorn, Hunt, & Osborn, *Organizational Behavior*, 2000 and Kouzes & Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*, 1997.

Developing Critical Competencies Through the Intergovernmental Personnel Act Mobility Program

This Governmentwide program could help your agency develop needed critical skills.

One of the best ways to learn new competencies is to work with someone who has already mastered them. This is why good supervisors often assign new employees to work closely with one of their team's higher performing members during their first months on the job. But what if the office is doing a new kind of work in which no one has yet become proficient? One option is to send employees to training, but time, budget, and other constraints often stand in the way.

Another strategy many agencies have used is to detail employees to another organization that has experienced employees to learn from. For example, Federal employees may serve rotational assignments in other Federal agencies. In contrast, the Intergovernmental Personnel Act (IPA) Mobility program is designed to allow agencies to detail employees to non-Federal organizations as well. Under the provisions of the IPA, Federal civilian employees can temporarily work for state governments, local governments, universities, and other eligible public or nonprofit organizations. The act also authorizes employees of these non-Federal organizations to work temporarily in Federal agencies—in case this might be the better way to transfer their skills into the agency.

The legal authority for the IPA Mobility program can be found in 5 USC, sections 3371 through 3375. Regulations governing the program are specified in CFR part 5, chapter 334 and summarized on the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) Web site at http://www.opm.gov/programs/ipa/mobility.asp. A few key facts can help you decide whether to consider the program in developing the competencies of your workforce:

- The program is designed to transfer needed skills into Federal agencies, with development of individual competencies as a secondary benefit. The agency's need for these competencies to serve its mission must be justified.
- Some employees—such as those in noncareer, excepted service, noncompetitive, temporary, or term appointments—are not eligible.
- Assignments under the program may last up to two years, with the potential for extending for another two years, and the time may be full time, part time or intermittent.
- Cost agreements for IPA mobility assignments are negotiated between the agency and the non-Federal organization. There is flexibility about which organization pays for the employee's basic pay, benefits, travel and other expenses.
- While on assignment, Federal employees remain subject to conflict of interest constraints about matters affecting their home agency.

OPM has delegated authority to agencies to determine—within guidelines—which non-Federal organizations are appropriate for IPA Mobility assignments. Agency leaders should become familiar with this program and use it when appropriate to transfer needed expertise into their organizations—and develop their employees at the same time. ❖

Coming Soon! MSPB Survey on Telework

As an employee, have you successfully teleworked, or have you considered working from home on a routine basis? As a manager, do you have successful experiences with or concerns about how to manage teleworkers? If so, our study on telework in the Federal Government will be of interest to you. The use of telework is growing and has a number of advantages for the agency, the employee, the community and the environment. However, there are practical limitations to the reasonable use of telework.

Our study is designed to learn more about how telework is operating in organizations, including the organizational or individual characteristics that facilitate or hinder the effectiveness of telework programs. The primary source of information for this study will be a survey of employees and managers who work in organizations with varied amounts of teleworking. If you receive a survey, we hope you will take the time to participate so that our study will yield an accurate picture of the current state of telework in the Federal Government and useful recommendations on how to improve the effectiveness of Federal telework programs.

"Googling" Applicants

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sexual orientation, their marital status, whether they have children, or their political affiliation, as in the first and last scenarios. Once the selecting official learns these things, he can't "un-learn" them. This may leave him vulnerable to claims of discrimination. Even if he doesn't knowingly use the information to make a selection, there is still a chance the information could unconsciously influence his selection decision.

In addition, a selecting official may find things about a candidate that are just not true. In this day of identity theft, fraud, and vast amounts of unverified information being available, it is dangerous to assume that what you read on the Internet is true. In the second scenario, it is possible that the applicant had a common name or had been the subject of identity theft and was found by local police to have not been involved in the fraud—retractions are often not printed in the news.

The Society for Human Resources Management report, *2007 Advances in E-Recruiting*, found that almost 50 percent of the survey participants search applicants' names using an online search engine before making a job offer. About 10 percent said they disqualified candidates on what was uncovered. Also, more employers are planning to use this search option in the future.

While Internet search engines may be an appropriate source for background investigations once the candidate has been offered the job, organizations should take care when using them in the pre-selection phase. If your organization is planning to use such a strategy, think it out carefully to ensure that your organization is: 1) not setting itself up for claims of discrimination and 2) not vulnerable to disqualifying applicants on the basis of false information.

And a word of advice to applicants—future employers may be watching, so be careful what you post on your social networking sites. ❖

Performance Management and Employee Engagement: Substance vs. Structure

In previous *Issues of Merit* editions, MSPB introduced our upcoming report on Federal employee engagement by defining engagement, why it should be important to Federal agencies, and its importance in retaining employees. Here, we examine the effect that one important human resources process has on employee engagement—performance management.

The elements we found to be important for engagement to flourish include performance management activities such as ensuring that employees know what is expected of them, making good use of employees' skills and abilities, giving employees the opportunity to earn a high performance rating, appropriately awarding employees, and giving employees the opportunity to improve their skills. To fully engage their employees, managers must provide them the appropriate guidance and feedback throughout the performance management cycle. Specifically, this includes planning work and setting expectations, monitoring performance, assessing and fulfilling training needs, and appropriately rating and rewarding performance.

What does not seem as clear is the effect that an agency's formal performance management structure has on employee engagement. Using our engagement scale to analyze data from the 2005 Merit Principles Survey, we found virtually no difference in the number of employees who were engaged based on which rating system they were rated under. Employees rated under the Government's traditional five-tiered rating system were just as engaged as employees rated under a pass-fail (two-tiered) system.

In addition, employees who received a formal rating of record in the most recent year were not significantly more engaged than those employees who had not received a formal rating for two years, four years, or five years and longer.

It would appear that the formal structure that agencies build around their performance management activities is not as important as those activities themselves. Supervisors who are successful in accomplishing their performance management tasks, whether formally or informally, are more likely to lead employees who are more engaged in their work. Of course, we do not advocate engaging employees for engagement's sake—the power of Federal employee engagement lies in the fact that, as our report shows, agencies with employees who are more engaged enjoy better outcomes than agencies with employees who are less engaged. ❖

U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board
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