

## **The U.S. Merit System Protection Board's Proposed 2011—2013 Research Agenda**

The U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) has the statutory responsibility to conduct objective, non-partisan studies that assess and evaluate Federal merit systems policies, operations, and practices. Our studies are typically Governmentwide in scope and take a long-term perspective on merit and effective human capital management. The prospective nature of the studies function, in conjunction with MSPB's adjudication of individual appeals and our authority to review human resources (HR) regulations, enables MSPB to fulfill its role as guardian of Federal merit systems and ensure the workforce is well managed and free from Prohibited Personnel Practices.

This document describes the research activities proposed for inclusion in the next three-year research cycle of MSPB's Office of Policy and Evaluation (OPE). It has three major sections. The first section describes the outreach activities used to gather research suggestions from OPE stakeholders and the general public. It also provides an overview of the process used to formulate OPE's research agenda from this input. The second section describes the eight major OPE research projects currently in progress. The final section describes the twenty-nine new research topics proposed for inclusion in the 2011-2013 research agenda.

### **Section 1: Development of the Proposed Research Agenda**

#### **Stakeholder Outreach**

OPE pursued several avenues to encourage input and collect ideas from a diverse group of stakeholders for our 2011-2013 research agenda. Subscribers to the MSPB Studies listserv were sent emails inviting them to participate and to provide research ideas either through a link to a short survey or by emailing input to a designated Research Agenda email address. Those who had recently contacted us for information (e.g., request for studies) were also sent this invitation, as were members of the Small Agency Council Training Coordinators, various components of the media, and members of the Federal Communicators Network. Several of these individuals were also given the opportunity for an interview regarding their input.

In addition to this general outreach, we directly contacted specific individuals or groups for input. They included Federal Human Resources Directors, members of the Chief Human Capital Officers Council (CHCOs), Labor Relations and Union Officials, special interest groups [e.g., Blacks in Government (BIG), National Association of Hispanic Federal Executives (NAHFE), Federally Employed Women (FEW)], as well as members of executive associations [e.g., Senior Executive Association (SEA), Federal Executive Board (FEB)], professional organizations [e.g., Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), International Personnel Assessment Council (IPAC)], some academicians, and public service groups including the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA), and the Partnership for Public Service (PPS).

We then conducted more in-depth interviews with a number of stakeholders who have a special interest in our mission, including individuals from NAPA, SEA, four Labor Unions, and the Federal HR and management communities. Overall, we received information from non-supervisory Federal employees, Federal team leaders and supervisors, Federal managers and executives, Federal policy makers, State or local government employees, private sector employees, non-profit sector employees, academicians, HR Directors, CHCOs, Labor and Union representatives, special interest groups, and executive associations.

## **OPE Analysis**

These outreach efforts produced over 900 suggestions through emails, narrative responses to survey questions, and interview notes. OPE analysts reviewed these responses, consolidated duplicate or similar suggestions, and gained a good sense of the topic areas that most concern our stakeholders.

These 900 plus stakeholder suggestions were initially organized into 22 broad topic areas. OPE analysts reviewed the suggestions individually in preparation for group analysis at a formal research retreat. At the retreat and in two follow-up meetings, OPE staff discussed, elaborated, and evaluated the merits of these research ideas. This iterative process resulted in our identifying 41 particular research topics which were then assigned to OPE analysts based on their backgrounds and interests, for the purpose of generating written descriptions for the topics.

Throughout the process of refining our list of research topics, OPE considered the following factors:

- Does the topic match our mission of promoting Merit Principles and preventing Prohibited Personnel Practices?
- Does OPE have the right skills and resources to study this topic well?
- Could a report on this topic have a significant effect on Federal workforce management?
- Is now (the next three years) an appropriate time to study this topic?
- Would this research unnecessarily duplicate existing research by other organizations that also study the Federal workforce?

Based upon these criteria, we developed the 29 research ideas that are presented below. These ideas are not listed in any particular order, although they are grouped by general topic areas. A short paragraph or two is also provided which describes in general the topic we would like to undertake. It should be recognized, however, that the exact nature of the topic will not be determined until we actually begin working on a particular project. This will allow us to adapt to what we learn as we begin to explore a given topic and make best use of our limited resources. Oftentimes we do not know exactly what niche our research can fill until we begin to immerse ourselves into a topic.

At any given point of time we expect to be working on 9 or 10 different projects. Of these projects we expect to complete at least six per year to meet office performance standards. In requesting approval from the Board members, we note that some of these potential topics may

not ultimately result in OPE projects. This could occur because the topics have been overcome by unforeseen events or because it is later determined that they do not represent a good expenditure of our limited resources. Similarly, we could add other topics that may arise which we believe have a greater impact on the management of the Federal workforce or that the Board may decide are more important for OPE to pursue.

Decisions about what topic on the list to undertake next depends on several factors. One of these factors will be what issues seem to be the most timely when resources become available to begin a new project. We also consider the capabilities of the analysts who are available to work on the project (not all analysts bring the same skills and knowledge) as well as the interest that staff members have in undertaking a particular project. Of course, the desires of the Board concerning the priority assigned to various projects will also affect our decisions.

### **Next Steps**

This proposed research agenda is currently under review by each of the three members of the Merit Systems Protection Board. It was prepared for presentation at a formal sunshine meeting with all three members of the Board and invited representatives of the public, which is projected to occur during early FY 2011.

Until such time as the proposed research topics have been reviewed, revised, and approved by the Board, this document is to be considered a draft that does not reflect the formal research plans of the Office of Policy and Evaluation.

## **Section 2: Current OPE Projects**

Below, we describe our research projects that are currently in progress.

### **Current Projects Overview**

1. Whistleblower Barriers: When Do Employees Come Forward?
2. Incidences of Prohibited Personnel Practices
3. Evaluating the Use of Telework in the Federal Government
4. Fair and Open Competition for Federal Employment
5. Women in the Federal Government: Ambitions and Achievements
6. Merit Principles Survey 2010
7. What is Favoritism and to What Extent is it a Problem?
8. Using Training and Experience Measures to Assess Applicants

### **Current Project Descriptions**

#### **1. Whistleblower Barriers: When Do Employees Come Forward?**

This report updates our 1994 report that examined the reasons why employees hesitate to report wrongdoing. It relies on data from our 2010 Merit Principles Survey as well as questionnaires that we have sent to agency Inspectors General, unions, and other stakeholder organizations. These instruments will capture Federal employee perceptions on whistleblowing and when it is appropriate.

We hope to use this report to explain to Congress and Federal agencies that the weakness in whistleblower protection laws is only one of many barriers to employee disclosure. An agency's culture and employee concerns about how an agency will respond to a disclosure can have even greater impacts on the decision making process than fear of a personnel action. This report will discuss what factors are most likely to cause an employee to come forward or remain silent and what agencies can do to create a culture in which employees do not fear reporting wrongdoing. Responses to questionnaires and data from the 2010 Merit Principles Survey are currently being analyzed for this report.

#### **2. Incidences of Prohibited Personnel Practices**

This report provides a discussion, based on case law, of what each Prohibited Personnel Practice means in order to educate readers and provide real-world examples of what conduct may constitute the commission of a Prohibited Personnel Practice.

This report moves beyond our earlier work, not only by providing a better developed definition of many Prohibited Personnel Practices, but also by investigating the extent to which employees perceive that Prohibited Personnel Practices are happening to others in the workplace. We hope to be able to identify how the perception of Prohibited Personnel Practices impacts the extent to

which employees are engaged and motivated, and to show how the avoidance of Prohibited Personnel Practices can make an agency's workforce more effective.

Data from the Merit Principles Survey 2010 is currently being analyzed for this report.

### **3. Evaluating the Use of Telework in the Federal Government**

The Federal workforce is under pressure from a variety of sources to increase its acceptance and use of telework. Congress has threatened to withhold funding from agencies not making sufficient progress in this regard. Proponents of telework cite numerous advantages that can be achieved through offering this flexibility to Federal employees. For instance, emergency situations and natural disasters require agencies to be capable of seamlessly continuing operations from a safe location. The negative effects of urban pressures, traffic congestion, harmful environmental emissions, and office overcrowding may be reduced with increased telework. Moreover, telework may improve work-life balance and job performance, and may reduce leave usage and employee turnover. Telework may also provide job opportunities for those with disabilities and allow people who have continuing health problems or who are recovering from injuries or illnesses to return to work more quickly and to remain productive.

Despite the many requirements and potential advantages of telework, questions remain about its use. This report will look at perceptions held by Federal employees and supervisors about telework and its advantages and disadvantages and identify barriers to implementing effective telework programs that support both mission accomplishment and employee work-life balance.

The internal draft of this report is in the OPE peer review process.

### **4. Fair and Open Competition for Federal Employment**

The principle of fair and open competition for filling jobs is a longstanding and fundamental element of Federal merit systems. This principle has been generally implemented through a requirement for public notice and acceptance of applications from the general public. These procedures notwithstanding, not all stakeholders agree that the Federal hiring system is both fair and open. For example, granting preference in hiring to certain groups is also a longstanding element of Federal merit systems, and there have always been valid reasons to exempt certain Federal positions from open competition. However, history shows a general trend toward bringing more and more positions under the requirements of open competition.

Today we see an historic confluence: almost complete decentralization of the Federal hiring process along with a proliferation of noncompetitive hiring authorities. Our major research focus involves examining whether these factors have combined to threaten the ideal of fair and open competition as it has been viewed in a historic context.

This study is in process, with a survey of Federal human resources specialists and assistants under development that will assess their attitudes toward (and agency practice with respect to) fair and open competition.

## **5. Women in the Federal Government: Ambitions and Achievements**

The Merit System Principles require Federal agencies to recruit “qualified individuals...in an endeavor to achieve a work force from all segments of society,” select and advance employees on the basis of relative ability, and use the Federal workforce efficiently and effectively. The study analyzes workforce and survey data to gauge the Federal Government’s progress in recruiting women, treating women fairly in the workplace, and advancing women to higher-level positions.

The report will emphasize the continuing importance of protections against stereotyping and prohibited discrimination, identify potential barriers to the advancement of women, and outline steps that agencies and employees can take to assure that the talents of all employees are properly recognized and utilized.

A draft report has been submitted to the Board members for review.

## **6. Merit Principles Survey 2010**

Motivating the Federal workforce to do more with less is likely to become more important as calls for leaner and more efficient Government proliferate. Further, with the increasing interest in measuring employee engagement there is a need to better understand the drivers of engagement. In the 2008 MSPB report, *The Power of Federal Employee Engagement*, an engagement scale was developed based on a literature review that may not have entirely captured the full engagement construct. The general motivation scale items in the MPS 2010 were designed to tap the missing engagement components of “effort above and beyond the minimum” and “inspire to do their best.”

The additional motivation-related scales included in the Merit Principles Survey 2010 will help us further develop the construct of engagement as well as to better understand what motivates the Federal workforce and impact the effort with which Federal employees engage in their work.

The report is in the process of literature review and data analysis using the Merit Principles Survey 2010 data.

## **7. What is Favoritism and to What Extent is it a Problem?**

The Merit System Principles and Prohibited Personnel Practices make it clear that employees should be protected against favoritism, which occurs when a supervisor or organization gives “any preference or advantage not authorized by law, rule or regulation” to one or more employees. Identifying what is viewed as evidence of favoritism, the extent to which it is a problem, and how to deal with it is the focus of this study.

Results from our Merit Principles Surveys, our 2007 Career Advancement Survey, and discussions with Federal employees indicate that many view favoritism as a significant problem in the Government. This study will attempt to better define favoritism and identify the extent to which it exists because of inappropriate supervisory behaviors as opposed to the perception of differential treatment that may be justifiable. For example, some supervisors may be knowingly providing unfair advantages to some favored employees or they may not be aware of subconscious biases they harbor that impact their behaviors. However, an alternative explanation exists that some supervisors may be rewarding high performers for their efforts but not doing so with sufficient transparency so that other employees can understand the basis for their decisions. Regardless of the underlying motivations, these perceptions of favoritism can have a very corrosive impact on the agency in terms of employee engagement, which may negatively affect performance and turnover.

This study is in the literature review phase.

## **8. Using Training and Experience Measures to Assess Applicants**

A large number of Federal hiring decisions draw on some assessment of applicants’ work-related training and experience. Some common methods are review of resumes and academic transcripts, self-evaluation of experience using rating schedules, awarding of points based on coursework or professional certifications, and sometimes simply counting the number of years an applicant has spent in the workforce. These methods vary in their validity, ease of implementation, and degree of acceptance by job applicants. Some newer assessment methods, such as accomplishment records, have great potential, but are not yet well-understood by applicants or selecting officials.

As written narratives about applicants’ knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) play a reduced role in the initial screening of applicants, agencies will adopt other methods to evaluate the training and experience each applicant brings to the job. This study summarizes current research and best practices in the evaluation of training and experience and makes practical recommendations that will help agencies choose and get the most from the most valid assessments. Agencies currently making effective use of these assessments will be highlighted.

This project is currently in the literature and best practice review phase.

## **Section 2: Proposed Research Topics**

The 29 proposed research topics identified by OPE’s stakeholders and analysts are listed below, organized into six broad areas of related research. Project descriptions begin on the next page.

### **Proposed Topics Overview**

#### **Hiring and Assessment**

1. Recruiting and Hiring with USAJOBS
2. The First Hurdle: Winnowing the Applicant Pool
3. Self-Assessment of Performance and Qualifications
4. Personality Assessments and Federal Hiring
5. How Do Selecting Officials Make Hiring Decisions?
6. Choosing Between Internal and External Hiring

#### **Supervision and Leadership**

7. Recruiting for the Senior Executive Service
8. Supervisor Selection: Assessment Tools and Selection
9. Supervisors’ Perceptions of Their Role, Skills, Motivation and Training Needs
10. Appropriate Use of Supervisory Authority
11. Dual Career Tracks for Supervisors and Technical Specialists
12. Leadership in Public Service: Politics and Policy

#### **Defending Merit**

13. Merit System Principles Education
14. Clean Records and the Public Interest
15. Treatment of Temporary Employees
16. Employment of Persons with Disabilities in the Federal Government
17. Workplace Violence
18. Focus on Veterans’ Hiring

#### **Focus on the Office of Personnel Management**

19. Hiring Reform
20. OPM Oversight in a Decentralized Civil Service
21. Issues with the Federal Classification System
22. Can We Learn More From Demonstration Projects?

#### **Performance Management**

23. What Is—and How Do You Measure—Job Performance?
24. The Extra Mile: Employee Engagement and High Performance
25. Awards Programs

#### **Building an Effective Workforce**

26. The Human Resources Workforce: Rising to the Challenge?
27. Building Effective Partnerships Between Management and Unions
28. Technology in the Workplace: What Do We Expect of Employees?
29. Challenges of the Aging Workforce

## **Proposed Topic Descriptions**

Each of the 29 proposed research topics is described below. Note that the precise nature of a research study based on each of these topics will not be determined until the project is initiated. This allows OPE analysts to adapt their research to the most current context and priorities—and to make best use of limited resources—when conducting a study. Therefore, the following descriptions provide potential directions for each study but are not intended to be exhaustive or to limit the actual research direction.

## **HIRING AND ASSESSMENT**

### **1. Recruiting and Hiring with USAJOBS**

In an effort to attract individuals from “all segments of society” for fair and open competition, the Federal Government has relied heavily on USAJOBS to advertise available jobs. Considering that this portal is often the first and only way for individuals to learn about Federal jobs and to determine whether their capabilities, qualifications, and interests align, it is incumbent upon agencies to provide clear, accurate, and sufficiently detailed information about jobs on USAJOBS. Yet, despite recent efforts to improve the content of vacancy announcements and redesign the website itself, anecdotal evidence suggests that USAJOBS is still a less-than-optimal medium for attracting individuals to Federal service.

Potential questions for a study of USAJOBS include:

- Can applicants get a clear sense of what jobs entail from vacancy announcements on USAJOBS?
- Do applicants understand how to apply for Federal jobs using the USAJOBS portal and linked staffing systems?
- Given the different terminology used by the Government versus the private sector for job functions, do applicants know how to determine which Federal jobs correspond to their capabilities, qualifications, and interests?
- Overall, do applicants need to “know a Fed” to translate the language and process for them, and to guide them towards appropriate jobs, and if so, what are the implications for fair and open competition?
- Are there other modes of recruitment that can more effectively draw in applicants for Federal jobs?
- How does the private sector recruit for jobs and can any of these methods be adapted to suit the Federal environment while still guaranteeing fair and open competition?

### **2. The First Hurdle: Winnowing the Applicant Pool**

Is the Federal Government using the most effective assessment tools, are we administering them correctly, and are we interpreting the results in the most useful way? Previous MSPB research has examined job simulations, structured interviews, and reference checking in order to

determine the best practices recommended by measurement experts and to recommend how to use these tools to improve Federal hiring. Our stakeholders have responded favorably to these reports suggesting interest in this area. Future projects in this area would build on this success by examining additional assessment tools and processes. The focus would be on tools used early in the assessment process to refine the applicant pool before more time- and resource-intensive methods come into play.

Potential questions for this area of research could include:

- What are the best assessment tools for early screening of applicants that satisfy criteria of high validity, low applicant burden, ease of administration, and acceptance by job applicants?
- How should resumes be evaluated and used in hiring?
- Which agencies have been successful in identifying and using appropriate screening tools? What can we learn from their successes?

Studies in this area can be used by agencies to improve employee selection procedures and thereby increase the capabilities of the Federal workforce.

### **3. Self-Assessment of Performance and Qualifications**

Several methods commonly employed by agencies to assess applicants for jobs and to evaluate employees' performance on the job require individuals to self-assess their capabilities and the relevance of their experiences and accomplishments. Examples include occupational questionnaires, resumes, and accomplishment records for applicants, and performance appraisal write-ups for employees. While these methods are relatively inexpensive to design, implement, and score, and while they have the potential to provide useful information, research and practical observation have shown that individuals are not always good at evaluating their capabilities—and that they are not always honest. Some individuals honestly believe that they are portraying themselves correctly, but they have unrealistic standards of comparison (either too high or too low). Some downplay their accomplishments. Others exaggerate or “word-smith” actual accomplishments. Some go so far as to describe fictitious capabilities or accomplishments. Regardless of the form, intent, or the underlying motivations, we know that such misrepresentation happens.

Potential research questions for this study could include:

- Are we encouraging misrepresentation by continuing to solicit self-report assessments from applicants for Federal jobs, and from employees for performance appraisal?
- How often does misrepresentation occur, and what is the relative degree of different types of misrepresentation (e.g., downplaying, exaggerating, lying)?
- What are the motivations underlying misrepresentation?
- What factors affect an individuals' ability to accurately assess capabilities?
- Are there ways to increase the accuracy of self-assessment?
- Are there feasible options for applicant assessment and for employee performance assessment that do not rely so heavily on self-assessment?

#### **4. Personality Assessments and Federal Hiring**

In the last decade, assessments of job applicant personality have become more common in private and non-profit sector hiring processes. These assessments range in quality from hastily-developed web-based questionnaires to more carefully-developed and validated instruments that measure well-researched traits such as Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, Neuroticism, Extroversion/Introversion and Openness to Experience. Until recently, there has been less emphasis on personality testing in public-sector hiring. As a result, selecting officials are not well informed about the strengths and weaknesses of personality testing. With the increased interest in the Federal sector, the time is ripe to take a closer look at these assessments.

This study could address questions such as:

- Can personality assessment tools make an effective contribution to the Federal selection process?
- How can an HR specialist or selecting official distinguish between a valid personality assessment and one of questionable value?
- Do personality assessments violate Merit Principles by introducing information into the selection process about personal characteristics that are not job-related? Are these personal characteristics implicitly job related?
- How easy is it for job applicants to “fake” scores on a personality assessment?
- How do job applicants feel about these assessments—and what effect does this have on decisions not to apply for some jobs?

This study would translate research on the validity and feasibility of personality assessment into practical implications for Federal hiring.

#### **5. How Do Selecting Officials Make Hiring Decisions?**

Research and practice have produced a great deal of information about the validity and feasibility of a wide variety of assessments used in Federal hiring. Previous Board research has described best practices in the use of structured interviews, job simulations, reference checks, and automated hiring systems. Information about the optimal use of other assessments is available from psychologists and human resources practitioners. We know more about how to choose the best measures of applicant abilities and arrange them into successive hurdles to minimize cost.

However, we are not well-informed about how deciding officials combine information from several sources to make a hiring decision. What factors do they consider—and what common errors of human judgment may get in the way? Answers to these questions can help agencies improve the hiring process by improving decision-making about assessments and applicants.

## **6. Choosing Between Internal and External Hiring**

With projected increases in Federal hiring due to retirements and growth in specific occupations, Federal agencies will need to consider not only how to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the hiring process, but also how to be more strategic in making hiring decisions, particularly in identifying sources from which to recruit. The source of the candidate—inside or outside the agency, internal or external to the Federal Government—is an important aspect of the hiring decision. That decision has both short-term implications for the hiring process and long-term implications for organizational performance and workforce demographics.

This study would examine the sources agencies use to fill positions, to identify patterns across agencies and occupations and to discover the reasons why agencies choose to fill positions with internal or external candidates, and explore the implications of those decisions for the Federal Government. The objective would be to help agencies make informed recruiting decisions and to identify practices and policies that may optimize the filling of Federal jobs with a diverse population of well-qualified employees.

## **SUPERVISION AND LEADERSHIP**

### **7. Recruiting for the Senior Executive Service**

The quality of an agency's leadership team is a critical component to how well the agency can meet its mission requirements. The Federal Government's ability to maintain an effective corps of senior executives during the anticipated increase in retirements is a growing concern, especially given recent survey results that suggest waning interest among the next generation in assuming these leadership posts. The focus of this study would be to examine how the Federal Government can ensure strong and effective continuity of operations through its senior leaders.

This study could address questions such as:

- What are the projected turnover rates of senior leaders and the pipeline for senior level positions?
- How is the pool of senior executives utilized in terms of background (political compared to career senior executives), mobility (movement of senior executives within and between agencies), and other features of the SES?
- How effectively do the Executive Core Qualifications and the Executive Review Board process identify, develop, and evaluate members of the Senior Executive Service?

With this opportunity to hire a large percentage of the SES corps as many begin to retire, now would be the ideal time to examine the qualifications and hiring process to ensure that they produce the best possible outcomes for future leadership within the Federal Government.

## **8. Supervisor Selection: Assessment Tools and Selection**

There is near universal recognition that we need to improve the skills of supervisors. Previous studies have shown that supervisors are key drivers of employee engagement, and thus organizational performance. A poor supervisor affects all employees in an organization and research shows that employees leave supervisors, not organizations. First-line supervisors also form the primary candidate pool from which higher-level managers and ultimately senior executives are chosen. Supervisory selection often places too much emphasis on the technical qualifications of supervisors and not enough on the competencies needed to effectively guide, manage, encourage, and hold their employees accountable. Improving supervisory selection, even incrementally, could have a huge impact on employee engagement and organizational performance. Better supervisors would strengthen merit systems, improve adherence to Merit System Principles, and reduce the occurrence of Prohibited Personnel Practices.

Research questions that might be addressed include:

- What non-technical competencies do supervisors need to be effective?
- What assessment tools could assist in evaluating the degree to which potential candidates possess necessary non-technical competencies?
- What case study examples demonstrate effective and efficient supervisory selection procedures?

Although supervisor selection can be studied on its own, comparisons or appropriate inferences could be made to the general strategies used to select managers and leaders. A study in this area can be used by agencies to improve supervisory selection procedures and thereby increase the capabilities of the Federal workforce.

## **9. Supervisors' Perceptions of Their Role, Skills, Motivation and Training Needs**

Previous studies have shown that employees, middle and upper-level managers, and agency leaders think that supervisors need to be better at being supervisors. But what do supervisors think of their supervisory role, the skills they have, don't have, and need to be effective, and the training they need and areas they want to improve? This study will examine supervisors' perceptions and experiences regarding their role, motivation, challenges, skills, training and the environment in which they operate. The information gathered could be compared to that obtained from middle and upper-level managers and agency leaders to identify common themes that could form the basis of recommendations on how to improve the performance of our current first-line supervisors. The results could also indicate areas in which there are misperceptions, or valid disagreements in perceptions that may create barriers to improving supervisory performance.

Supervisors' perceptions of what motivates, encourages, challenges, and frustrates them are relevant to any effort to improve their ability to be more effective. Improving the performance of our current supervisors can have a large impact on their employees and on organizational performance. Better supervisory performance also strengthens merit, improves adherence to the Merit System Principles, and reduces the occurrence of Prohibited Personnel Practices.

## **10. Appropriate Use of Supervisory Authority**

Much attention has been paid recently to issues regarding civility in the workplace. A single overbearing employee can poison the work environment and affect an organization's productivity and efficiency, as well as the health of coworkers. Unfortunately, overbearing behavior may be in the eye of the beholder—one co-worker's insensitive ranting may be another's drive to be successful. However, when such behaviors are exhibited by supervisors they can have a detrimental impact on an organization's morale and productivity. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this may be an issue that needs closer examination.

Research questions that might be addressed include:

- To what extent do Federal employees believe that their supervisors appropriately use their supervisory authority?
- Does overbearing behavior pertain to issues primarily related to the work of the organization, or does it also concern the employee's life outside of work?
- How open are Federal supervisors to employees' ideas about how to accomplish work differently, or more effectively?

## **11. Dual Career Tracks for Supervisors and Technical Specialists**

In order to advance to higher paying positions in the Federal Government, employees must often take on supervisory responsibilities. For those not interested in such responsibilities, there exists limited opportunity to earn higher pay and increased responsibilities within their chosen field. A dual career track is a non-supervisory job which receives higher pay than traditional non-supervisory jobs because it requires the performance of more complex and higher level duties and possession of advanced, specialized skills not typically required of similar non-supervisory jobs. NASA's Dual Career Ladder (DCL) Program is one example of how the Federal Government has implemented such programs and has enabled outstanding technical contributors to attain the same prestige and compensation as individuals on a managerial track. This model may be studied and used as a basis for expanding the adoption of dual career tracks while also considering the increased classification flexibilities required for more widespread implementation in other agencies.

The study could address the following issues:

- What benchmarks exist in the private sector from which the Federal Government could learn?
- Are there examples in the Federal Government, such as NASA, that contain best practices in implementing such an approach?
- What barriers does the classification system present to a dual track strategy?
- Would this type of career advancement affect employee satisfaction, intention to stay, and overall performance?
- Are attrition rates different between dual tracked and non-dual tracked employees?

Ultimately, this study could examine whether a dual track strategy would help improve Federal supervision by providing technical experts a path for promotion other than a supervisory job for which they would not be a good fit.

## **12. Leadership in Public Service: Politics and Policy**

What do we expect of senior leaders in the Federal Government? Those who study organizations have created general models of leadership that emphasize vision, entrepreneurship, charisma, and a sometimes-contradictory collection of other attributes of successful leaders. None of these models is an adequate description—or prescription—for leadership in public service. This report would examine the unique constraints of public sector leadership, including differences between the political appointee and career executive roles and how these leaders can best work together.

This study might address such questions as:

- How can new political leaders most effectively transition into agency leadership roles?
- What do political leaders and careerists need to know about working together?
- How can leaders achieve an effective balance between a new administration’s goals and the need for continuity in programs and services to their stakeholders?

## **DEFENDING MERIT**

### **13. Merit System Principles Education**

The Merit System Principles form the bedrock of the Federal civil service. The Board is charged with ensuring that the Federal personnel decisions adhere to these principles. At a strategic planning offsite in May 2010, Board leadership emphasized that the agency should play a clear role in educating managers, HR professionals, and employees on what the Merit Principles are and why they are important. The purpose of this report would be to discuss what the principles are, what they mean, and evaluate how well Federal employees think they are protected by them.

### **14. Clean Records and the Public Interest**

This study would examine the function of clean records as a settlement feature. It would address how common they are, why agencies choose to use them, and the potential consequences they can have on the ability of others to obtain an accurate reference check. The question of the public interest and the need for Government employees to speak honestly when dealing with the public or other agencies would also be addressed.

## **15. Treatment of Temporary Employees**

Temporary appointment is a hiring mechanism that allows organizations to fill positions when there is a limited duration for the service provided. This type of appointment allows agencies to manage changing workloads. According to the Office of Personnel Management, a temporary appointment may be made to fill a short-term position that is not expected to last more than one year; or, meet an employment need that is scheduled to be terminated within one or two years for reasons such as reorganization, abolishment, or the completion of a specific project or peak workload; or, fill positions that involve intermittent (irregular) or seasonal (recurring annually) work schedules.

Although most temporary positions are filled through open competitive examination procedures, temporary employees do not serve a probationary period and are not eligible for promotion, reassignment, or transfer to other jobs. They are not eligible for the Federal life insurance program and are not covered under the retirement system. After one year of service, they are eligible for health care coverage but must pay all of the cost. Recently, there have been charges that agencies have been using the temporary hiring authority to avoid having to offer expensive benefits to a large number of employees. The allegations are that the lack of benefits contributes to high turnover which may extend project completion dates, limit long term planning, and jeopardize employee safety.

This report would investigate how temporary appointments affect the efficient and effective use of the Federal workforce.

Possible research questions include:

- What is the overall number of temporary appointments in the Federal workforce?
- Which agencies make the most use of temporary appointments?
- What types of work are performed by employees on temporary appointments?
- What is the impact of temporary employment on project completion, agency mission, and the temporary employees themselves?
- What are the re-employment and turnover rates of temporary employees?

## **16. Employment of Persons with Disabilities in the Federal Government**

Approximately 54 million Americans are living with disabilities and this population is underrepresented in the Federal workforce. Individuals with targeted disabilities currently represent less than 1 percent of that workforce. In July 2000, Executive Order 13163, summoned Federal agencies to hire an additional 100,000 individuals with disabilities over 5 years. Yet it appears that few steps were taken to answer that call in subsequent years. In 2010, President Obama signed Executive Order 13548 to increase Federal employment of people with disabilities. This order calls for Federal agencies to improve their efforts to employ workers with disabilities through increased recruitment, hiring, and retention in compliance with the previous Executive Order and achievement of the goals set forth therein over 5 years, including specific goals for hiring individuals with targeted disabilities.

Possible research questions that this study could address include:

- What steps did agencies take 10 years ago to meet the hiring goals of Executive Order 13163 and what prevented meeting the hiring goal?
- Are agencies utilizing OPM's "model" recruitment and hiring strategies?
- What steps are agencies taking to recruit, retain, and promote individuals with disabilities?
- Are Federal agencies being held accountable for hiring people with disabilities?
- How are reasonable accommodation requests being managed and to what extent is employee productivity improving?
- How satisfied are Federal employees with disabilities with their workplace?

This report could identify strategies that help achieve a reduction in disability discrimination cases and payouts and identify best practices with regards to employment of individuals with disabilities. In addition, the report could identify barriers with regard to employing individuals with disabilities and provide agencies with a clearer definition of "disability." The ultimate goal of this report is to increase productivity with an underrepresented pool of candidates—the disabled—and move the Federal Government in line to become the Nation's Model Employer for persons with disabilities.

## **17. Workplace Violence**

Issues related to employee safety in the workplace continue to receive attention in the popular press as well as by good management groups. This attention seems warranted given the frequency that incidents related to these issues occur—from violent outbursts of a single dissatisfied employee or customer to concerted efforts by groups or individuals to inflict large scale damage on facilities or employees. Any one of these occurrences is likely to interrupt agency operations in the short term and may cause lingering problems for the well being of employees and the completion of long term organization missions. This report would seek to make recommendations to help agencies prevent such incidents, or mitigate the effects that they have on agency operations when they occur.

Topics that may be reviewed include:

- What are the perceptions of Federal employees about the prevalence of violence in their workplace?
- What are best practices regarding violence prevention programs in agencies, the private sector and at the state and local level?
- Do Federal employees know how to react to natural or man-made disasters?
- What is the state of continuity of operations plans in the Federal Government?

## **18. Focus on Veterans' Hiring**

Veterans' hiring authorities are a volatile topic in the Federal Government. Veterans' hiring is a public policy that is seen by some as at odds with the Merit System Principles and by others as a valuable acknowledgement of veterans' sacrifice. A number of hiring laws and authorities provide a basis for veterans hiring and can be viewed as exceptions to merit. These include veterans' preference, VEOA, VRA, and USERRA.

Research questions that might be addressed include:

- Is veterans' preference typically applied correctly?
- Are veterans usually granted preference when they apply for it?
- What are the different authorities and how do they differ? Are they being used effectively?
- What veteran hiring authorities do we need and how should they be implemented?
- How do veterans search for and apply for jobs?
- What impact is veterans' preference having on hiring decisions?
- Is there resistance to the hiring of veterans?

This report would educate readers about the issues associated with these hiring authorities.

## **FOCUS ON THE OFFICE OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT**

### **19. Hiring Reform**

OPM's Hiring Reform initiative has several goals including improving agency use of valid and reliable assessments to increase the quality of candidates for Federal jobs, agency use of category rating procedures to give managers a larger number of qualified job candidates, reduced timelines for agencies to fill vacancies, and improved applicant experiences when seeking Federal employment. The scope and potential impact of this initiative demand that it be carefully reviewed to determine the extent to which the goals are met and identify what is working well and what can be improved. This study would assess how well hiring reform is accomplishing its objectives.

Questions that may be addressed include:

- How have agencies adapted to using category rating procedures?
- Has the quality of referrals to selecting officials been improved?
- Do selecting officials receive a diverse group of candidates for consideration?
- Do selecting officials believe the recruitment and assessment process has been improved?
- Has the average amount of time to fill a vacancy been reduced?
- Has the applicant experience improved?
- Do HR Specialists believe the recruitment and selection process has been improved?
- Are there any unintended outcomes?

- Have “bottom line” results (turnover rates, percentages and levels of employee engagement) been affected?
- What are agencies’ perceptions of OPM’s leadership on this initiative?

## 20. OPM Oversight in a Decentralized Civil Service

The Civil Service Reform Act (CSRA) sought to balance delegation and flexibility with accountability. One component of that accountability is OPM oversight of how agencies manage their delegated responsibilities. Accordingly, title 5, United States Code, Section 1104 requires OPM to “establish and maintain an oversight program to ensure that activities under delegated authorities are in accordance with the Merit System Principles and OPM standards.”<sup>1</sup> The staffing and focus of OPM and Federal agencies have varied greatly since the CSRA.

In recent years, OPM has sought to expand agencies’ roles in monitoring use of human resources authorities and adherence to Merit System Principles and legal requirements. For example, OPM has created, and directed agencies to use the Human Capital Assessment and Accountability Framework (HCAAF), which assesses agency alignment of their human resources programs with mission requirements and with OPM standards (which may reflect or integrate Administration initiatives), in addition to compliance with Merit System Principles and public policy requirements such as veterans’ preference.

The effectiveness of the OPM oversight program, in particular the success of requiring agencies to assume a greater role for self-monitoring and self-correction, is not known. Although the Board has responsibility for assessing and reporting on significant actions of OPM, it has not formally studied OPM efforts to oversee agency adherence with Merit Systems Principles and other laws governing Federal human resources management since 1998.<sup>2</sup>

Possible questions to examine include:

- What human resources programs and decisions are subject to systematic compliance monitoring, through OPM or agency review?
- How does OPM assess compliance with law and Merit System Principles in the excepted service, including the non-title 5 excepted service?
- What effects have OPM oversight activities had on agency human resources policies and practices?
- How do Federal agencies, Federal employees, and other stakeholders view OPM oversight?
- Does the CSRA provide adequate authority for OPM or other agencies to assess and enforce Federal agency adherence to Merit Systems Principles?

---

<sup>1</sup> See also Executive Order 13197, *Governmentwide Accountability for Merit System Principles; Workforce Information*, 66 FR 7853-7854, January 18, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *Civil Service Evaluation: The Evolving Role of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management*, Washington, DC, July 1998.

## **21. Issues with the Federal Classification System**

OPM’s website states “Position classification is a process through which Federal jobs (i.e., positions) are assigned to a pay system, series, title, and grade or band, based on consistent application of position classification standards.” The standards are used to “... encourage uniformity and equity in the classification of positions by providing a common reference across organizations, locations, and agencies.”

Although intuitively appealing, the system and standards for classifying Federal positions and creating position descriptions were created decades ago in a work environment drastically different from today, when the workspace could be cleanly partitioned into discrete jobs in a clearly defined—and structured—fashion. However, the commonly integrated and cross functional nature of today’s work may preclude the appropriateness of such a rigid system. This leads to several potential questions about the classification system including:

- What problems exist with the current classification system?
- To what extent does the classification system help meet the demands of today’s integrated work?
- What effect does the structure of the classification system have on employees’ ability to continuously adapt to change, and be flexible in application of knowledge and skills?
- How do the standards used to classify Federal jobs support a changing workforce? What effect does the system have on employees’ ability to transition to different kinds of jobs and occupational families?
- What about movement between competitive and exceptive services?
- What are the alternatives to using the current classification system?

## **22. Can We Learn More From Demonstration Projects?**

Federal agencies may obtain authority from OPM to waive existing Federal human resources management law in title 5, United States Code, and title 5, Code of Federal regulations, to develop and evaluate innovative alternatives to existing systems. There are currently active demonstration projects with the Department of Defense Acquisition Workforce, the Department of Energy National Nuclear Security Administration, and the Department of Defense Science and Technology Labs. Although such projects have great potential to foster innovation and improvement in Federal workforce management, relatively few projects have been undertaken. The projects that have been initiated under this authority have focused almost exclusively on employee compensation issues, even though the authority allows examination of other innovations as well. A careful study of the demonstration project approval process could help OPM realize the unrealized potential of this authority.

A study in this area might address issues such as:

- Why are some proposed demonstration projects approved while others are not?
- What barriers may discourage agencies from proposing demonstration projects?
- Are there some projects that should be done, but lack an agency sponsor?

- When a demonstration project is successful, how can the innovation on which it is based be made permanent?
- How broadly does OPM interpret its authority to conduct demonstration projects?

## **PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT**

### **23. What Is—and How Do You Measure—Job Performance?**

The continuing transition to more knowledge-based work in the Federal Government has created an environment in which employees and managers are struggling to identify what constitutes a job, and further, what constitutes appropriate performance within and across jobs. Naturally, this has implications for the effectiveness of any performance management system, and the Federal Government has definitely struggled in this domain. Accuracy and clarity in defining and communicating what constitutes job performance is critical for employees and for the agency.

How performance is measured depends on how it is defined. It can be seen as an all or nothing phenomenon or divided into separate components. The working definition of performance can focus on specific employee behaviors, accomplishment of key work tasks, achievement of particular results, or some combination of these. There are also questions about how interpersonal factors affect performance and whether performance expectations legitimately vary over time and work context.

Potential research questions could include:

- How can performance best be measured?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages to having the same system of measurement across jobs and agencies?
- How good are supervisors at measuring employees' performance?
- How can the subjectivity and/or bias be reduced in supervisory ratings?
- Can the quality of work performance be rated objectively? Is it realistic to believe that objective measures can be defined for all jobs?
- Should supervisors take into account other factors not in the performance standard (e.g., helpful behaviors, personality, relationships)?
- What performance appraisal systems are available in the private sector?
- If performance can be appropriately defined and measured, what are the criteria that define the usefulness of performance feedback?

## **24. The Extra Mile: Employee Engagement and High Performance**

In recent reports, we demonstrated the link between high levels of employee engagement and improved agency outcomes and we have made recommendations for improving the level of employee engagement in the Federal workforce. Given the popularity of the last set of reports and given that the data they were based on is now rather dated (2005), we are limited in the additional recommendations that we can offer to Federal agencies on this important topic. More recent data can be used to refine our scale that measures an employee's level of engagement, so that we can be in a better position to advise agencies on the topic of employee engagement.

Areas of inquiry may include:

- What motivates Federal employees to produce better outcomes?
- What is the relationship between recent personnel actions and an employee's level of engagement?
- How has the average level of engagement in Federal agencies changed over time?
- What is the difference between employee engagement and employee satisfaction in the Federal Government?
- How do employee burnout and career transition factor into the engagement equation?

## **25. Awards Programs**

The purpose of an awards program is to recognize individual, group, and organizational performance, with a goal of motivating all employees to perform better. Both monetary and non-monetary awards (e.g., recognition awards, time off) are used to motivate employees. Money, time, and effort are spent on the awards program and this study will examine its fairness and effectiveness.

Questions that may be addressed in this study include:

- Who receives performance awards (e.g., agency, occupation, grade/salary level, race, ethnicity, gender, veteran status, individual or team)?
- What are the criteria for receiving an award and are those criteria consistently applied?
- Do employees understand how the award program operates and what they need to do in order to be considered for an award?
- What types of awards are most motivating? Do employees value the awards the organization offers or would they prefer something else?
- What effect do individual awards have on teamwork?
- Do employees believe the awards program is being administered fairly?
- Is the cost of the program (e.g., funds distributed, costs of non-monetary awards) worth the benefits received (e.g., productivity, reduced turnover, employee motivation)?

## **BUILDING AN EFFECTIVE WORKFORCE**

### **26. The Human Resources Workforce: Rising to the Challenge?**

Over the past 20 years, the role of the Human Resources Management (HRM) function has evolved from focusing on operations and policy enforcement (including the Federal Personnel Manual) to becoming a strategic partner to help the agency more effectively and efficiently achieve its mission-related goals through its employees. However, results from recent surveys of Chief Human Capital Officers suggest that these experts have some concerns about the skill levels of the current HR staff. This is an especially critical issue since the demands of current HR staff can be expected to increase as a result of the emerging Hiring Reform effort.

This study would seek to examine the role of the HRM function to determine what it is expected to do from the perspective of both the HR staff and their customers, how well HR staff and line managers think they are doing, and to assess the skills of current HR employees. At the agency level, we could assess the level of satisfaction with HRM services and the match between perceived roles and expectations. At the HR office level, we could examine the recruitment, selection, qualifications (e.g., certification) and career paths of HR employees. The goal would be to make recommendations for improving the effectiveness of HRM (in terms of organizational role and capability of staff) given HRM's critical role in each agency.

### **27. Building Effective Partnerships Between Management and Unions**

In December 2009, President Obama signed Executive Order 13522, *Creating Labor Management Forums to Improve Delivery of Government Services*. The Executive Order states that management should discuss workplace challenges and problems with labor and endeavor to develop solutions jointly. To facilitate these discussions, the Executive Order directs all agencies to establish labor management forums to help identify problems and propose solutions to better serve the public and complete agency missions. The purpose of this study would be to help agencies manage more efficiently and effectively through the use of these partnerships.

The focus of this study would be to identify the barriers that exist to establishing effective partnerships between management and unions, particularly in building trust among those involved. We could explore what best practices exist in Government and the private sector for establishing such partnerships and what has fostered the ability to establish mutual trust among stakeholders. We could also explore the differences between formal partnerships and informal partnerships and how that affects trust.

## **28. Technology in the Workplace: What Do We Expect of Employees?**

Use of technology in the workplace has increased exponentially since the 1990's. Computers, phones, PDAs, wireless internet, web 2.0 applications, and social networking allow work to be done almost anywhere and almost anytime. Employees can reach the office and the office can reach them 24/7. Technology, when used appropriately, can help make work more effective and efficient, improve access to employees and their knowledge, improve continuity of operations (COOP), and thus improve organizational performance. Using technology appropriately can also improve employee work-life balance, increase employee engagement, and improve personal productivity which all have primary or secondary benefits to the organization. However, when technology is not used appropriately, it can lead to employee information overload, employee burn-out, reduced engagement, reduced collaboration, lower productivity, higher employee turnover, and thus lower organizational performance. Overall, the use of technology relates to the efficient and effective management of the workforce, and can involve issues of fairness, performance management, and training and development.

This study might address questions such as:

- What are employees', supervisors', managers' and leaders' perceptions of and experiences with using different types of technology and how has it impacted them, their work, and their organizations?
- Is the Government able to recruit, select and develop the talent needed to make the best use of workplace technology?
- What organizational and workforce characteristics or policies relate to more or less effective use of technology?
- What strategies can be used to ensure technology is used appropriately to maximize its advantages and minimize its disadvantages?
- How do you determine what types of technologies are going to be effective in a given workforce?
- What needs to be done (e.g., in terms of systems, policy, and training) to ensure employees can use various technologies effectively?

The study could also consider how technology relates to managing information overload, affording effective employee flexibilities (e.g., flexiplace, flexitime), increasing the focus on results and productivity rather than physical presence at the office (e.g., results oriented work environment or ROWE), ensuring continuity of operations (COOP), and allowing for improved transparency and service to the public.

## **29. Challenges of the Aging Workforce**

The Federal Government is faced with an increasingly aging workforce resulting in large numbers of retirement-eligible employees. This presents challenges such as shortages in leadership, specialized skills, and knowledge, but also presents opportunities. To address this issue, Federal agencies need to consider how they hire and retain older workers. They need to strike a balance in how they retain the critical skills they have with recruiting and selecting

persons from outside the Government—in an increasingly competitive environment—who have the competencies needed to replace experienced employees who leave the workforce. A review of the problems agencies are experiencing and avenues for solutions will uncover the use and merit of various hiring and retention methods currently used to combat these challenges.

The following areas are of interest for investigation:

- What prevents agencies from retaining employees who are eligible for retirement? What are the challenges associated with knowledge transfer from these employees to remaining staff? What challenges are associated with attracting older applicants who have specialized skills?
- What impact are OPM's hiring tools having on recruiting older workers with the necessary knowledge and skills?
- What agency best practices have successfully assisted with effectively engaging, managing, and retaining their older workforce?
- What practices will create opportunities for Federal managers to successfully increase productivity through knowledge transfer?
- How can the Government best compete for the talent it needs in an increasingly-competitive environment?

By analyzing the impact of retirement eligible employees and making recommendations to combat the loss of their knowledge, we will preserve the history of the Federal Government and save valuable resources.