insights & analyses for Federal human capital management

# Issues of Merit

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## Federal Telework: Lessons Learned

*There are a number of lessons agencies can learn from each other as they establish their telework programs.*

With the passage of the Telework Enhancement Act in December 2010, Federal agencies are required to establish a telework program. Some organizations are further along in this process than others, and several already have a long track record of success. For an upcoming U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) report on telework, we interviewed representatives from three organizations that have long-standing telework programs to identify common elements that enabled them to implement effective telework programs.

One element they have in common is support from senior leadership. Examples of this support include communicating the message about the benefits and challenges of telework to all employees, providing resources needed to effectively telework, and encouraging managers as well as employees to telework.

A second element the organizations have in common is that they provide employees with appropriate equipment, technology, and technical support to perform their job duties. As one interviewee stated, "Technology is not the solution; it is the enabler." As such, the range of equipment and technology employees receive is based on what is required to get the job done. In some instances employees need minimal equipment and can use their own personal computers. In other circumstances, employees are fully outfitted with laptop computers that have collaborative applications, printers, fax machines, video and web conferencing capabilities, and office furniture and supplies.

Good performance management is the third common element. Interviewees noted that a supervisor's ability to communicate meaningful performance standards and monitor results is critical as the paradigm for evaluating performance is necessarily shifting from observing what employees do to documenting output and outcomes. Interviewees emphasized that all employees should be treated fairly and equitably—i.e., employee performance measures should be the same regardless of work location. As such, interviewees provide supervisory training on how to manage in a remote environment.

The fourth common element is training, which provides the platform for understanding the basics about telework. Generally there is an equipment and technology component that provides participants with instruction on how to set up and operate equipment and how to obtain technology support. Equally or even more important is training that

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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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DIRECTOR'S PERSPECTIVE

# The Next Step in Applicant Assessment

*Now that hiring reform is up and running, OPM is providing some valuable tools to help agencies assess applicants.*

In May of last year, President Obama signed a memorandum that was intended to change the way in which applicants apply and are evaluated for Federal jobs. The idea was to radically make over the Federal hiring process. One key part of the reform effort was to do away with requiring applicants to submit narrative write-ups on various knowledge, skills, or abilities (KSAs) and let them submit simple resumes. The concern was that the KSA write-ups were time consuming and off-putting to applicants and at the same time increased the time it took for agency personnel to evaluate the narrative submissions.

Nevertheless, KSAs did play an important role in the applicant assessment process. The evaluation of the KSA submissions provided agencies with a means of screening the large number of applications received for many Federal jobs and identifying those applicants who should be given further consideration, such as through a structured interview. Without the KSAs, agencies will need to find other ways to evaluate applicant qualifications and determine who should move on in the process.

Many agencies will turn to simple resume reviews and/or occupational questionnaires that ask applicants to provide information concerning their training and work experiences. As I discussed in the September 2010 edition of *Issues of Merit*, these assessment tools are limited in their ability to measure quality of experience. In the absence of other alternatives, we hear that some agencies are requiring applicants to submit narrative KSA write-ups as a second stage in the application process. This has the virtue of only requiring applicants who are at least minimally qualified for a position to provide narrative write-ups, but it does little to speed up the overall hiring process. What agencies really need is a valid and cost effective way to determine which applicants should proceed in the evaluation process.

The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) is grappling with this difficult issue and has recently undertaken valuable work designed to fill this void in the applicant assessment process. OPM has worked with a contractor to develop comprehensive job analyses for the 12 most commonly-filled occupations in the Federal Government at grades 5–15. They then developed a battery of four online assessments designed to measure the extent to which applicants possess key cross-cutting competencies for these occupations. The four assessments cover situational judgment, occupational reasoning, mathematical ability, and occupational interaction (such as dependability and conscientiousness). The assessments make use of such innovations as avatar-based simulations and computer adaptive tests that choose new questions based on applicant responses to previous questions.

To the extent that the same competencies are critical to the successful performance of different jobs, it is

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# Governmentwide Applicant Assessment Tools

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expected that the assessment procedures being developed can ultimately be used as part of the evaluation process for an even greater variety of jobs. Eventually OPM hopes to expand the assessments to include technical competencies and even offer the assessments as part of a Career Discovery Tool that will help applicants identify relevant career paths.

The way the process is designed to work is by asking applicants to first submit resumes and possibly respond to questions concerning prior work experience and training. Those determined to be minimally qualified for the position will receive an email inviting them to take the appropriate online assessments. The assessments will be unproctored but timed. Applicants will be required to answer questions that are selected from a large bank of questions based on the system's model of the test-taker's ability. It is expected that applicants will not be able to retake a test for 1 year.

To ensure that hiring decisions can be made quickly, applicants must complete the required assessments within 48 hours after the vacancy announcement closes. The automated system immediately scores the results, and OPM refers all applicants in the top quality category to the selecting official for further evaluation. OPM strongly encourages selecting officials to use at least one other highly-valid selection procedure, such as a structured interview, to serve as the basis for the final hiring decision. The additional assessment can test for needed technical competencies and can also be used to validate the unproctored test results.

Using this approach will allow OPM to create an applicant competency profile for each candidate that the applicant can use for consideration for other jobs which require the same competency. OPM collaborated with agency subject-matter experts to develop the competency models and testing procedures. It expects to pilot the system in select agencies this summer and hopes to go live sometime in 2012.

Although a great deal of work still needs to be done to refine the online assessment process and validate the new assessment tools, in my opinion, OPM deserves a lot of credit for taking on this difficult task. I believe OPM's proposed online assessment procedures have the potential to fill the gap in the candidate evaluation process left by the elimination of KSA narrative write-ups. The online assessment process has the potential to provide an effective successive hurdle approach to candidate evaluation that can be cost effective, greatly speed up the hiring process, and allow the Government to make better selections for its vacant positions. ❖

Director, Policy and Evaluation

## Thank You For The Good Ideas!

MSPB's Office of Policy and Evaluation (OPE) pursued several avenues to encourage input and collect ideas from stakeholders for our 2011-2013 research agenda. We sought suggestions from our ListServ, an online survey, invitations to professional groups, and through numerous individually emailed invitations.

The response was overwhelming, and outreach efforts produced over 900 different suggestions. We received information from non-supervisory Federal employees, Federal team leaders and supervisors, Federal managers and executives, Federal policy makers, state and local government employees, private sector employees, non-profit sector employees, academicians, Human Resource Directors, Chief Human Capital Officers, Labor and Union representatives, executive associations, and affinity groups. There were many thoughtful and interesting suggestions.

Through discussion and analysis, we distilled this input to a draft agenda of twenty-nine proposed topics to study during the next 3 years. Following the Government in the Sunshine Act meeting on December 8, 2010, we collected additional comments from the public and finalized the agenda. The final research agenda was approved by the Board in March 2011. A copy of the OPE 2011-2013 research agenda is now available on the Board's web site at www.mspb.gov/sunshineactmeeting/. OPE thanks all of the *Issues of Merit* readers who contributed ideas to this effort!

# Credentialed But Not Qualified?

*Just how prepared are college graduates to carry out the Government's missions?*

In the February 2011 edition of *Issues of Merit*, we highlighted a recent study that projected a shortfall in the number of well-educated workers necessary to meet future job demands. We pointed out that Federal agencies may have to compete even harder to attract candidates with the skills necessary to carry out the many missions of the Government. In January 2011, researchers from New York University and the University of Virginia released the results of a large-scale study that demonstrates another disturbing education trend that could negatively impact agencies' ability to hire high-quality candidates: a large segment of college students are not obtaining the basic skills necessary to prepare them for the working world.

In their book, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (2011) and an accompanying study released by the Social Science Research Council, Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa detail their longitudinal study that tracks the learning of 2,322 students enrolled across a diverse range of U.S. colleges and universities. They note that the primary goals of post-secondary education are teaching students to think critically and to communicate effectively. These are also key skills Federal agencies seek in applicants, given the increasingly knowledge-based nature of their occupations. However, the central finding of the study is that many students are only minimally improving their skills in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing during their college careers.

The authors used survey responses, transcript data, and the results of the Collegiate Learning Assessment—a standardized test administered to students in their first semester and at the end of their second year—to measure students' progress in developing these key skills. They found that 45 percent of the students demonstrated no statistically significant improvement in key measures of critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing during their first 2 years of college; 36 percent did not improve significantly in these areas after 4 years. Furthermore, many of the students who did show improvement tended to show only modest improvements.

This lack of learning was attributed to many factors, including the lack of rigor in academic programs. On average, the sampled students reported spending only 12 hours per week studying and over one-third spent less than 5 hours per week preparing for their courses. Half of the students reported that they did not take a course during the prior semester that required at least 20 pages of writing and one-third did not take a course that required 40 or more pages of reading per week. The authors cited other national surveys that found similar trends in college seniors.

With Federal work shifting to knowledge-based work, this trend is troubling. In FY 2010, over 60 percent of the workforce was employed in professional and administrative occupations, and 44 percent of new hires were hired into professional and administrative occupations. These occupations require the type of skills employers assume students are learning in college—critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing. If undergraduates are not obtaining these skills, there are several implications for Federal agencies as they try to compete for talent.

First, agencies may need to re-evaluate their recruitment sources. Many rely on general college recruitment strategies to attract candidates. They go to local colleges and universities or to those that have specific educational programs. That may not be enough as the study shows evidence of institutional differences in terms of programmatic rigor. Agencies may need to look more closely at the universities from which they recruit and evaluate the strategies and measures they use to ensure their students are actually learning key skills.

Second, agencies will need to pay closer attention to the quality of their applicant assessment tools. They should be developing tools that will allow them to identify students who are able to perform the job. Many employers have assumed that a college education provides the core competencies necessary for future success. This study indicates that is not necessarily the case.

Finally, agencies may find that they have to do more to develop new employees than they thought they would have to do. Employee development requires time and resources—two things Federal agencies are short on these days—and development resources are often the first cut when budgets are tight. Competition for college graduates is high; now agencies have to face the possibility that the graduates they do recruit may not have the basic skills needed to succeed on the job. Strong recruitment, selection, and development strategies will be necessary to make up for these deficiencies. ❖

# Setting Expectations: What Training is Most Likely to Succeed?

*Not all competencies are equally trainable, and educating supervisors and employees on this fact could reduce instances of unnecessary training.*

A recently-released MSPB report, *Making the Right Connections: Targeting the Best Competencies for Training*, indicates that some Federal employees seek training that is not likely to succeed because the competencies it addresses do not improve unless the employee already has natural ability in that area. Competencies that are easy to learn, or that we refer to as "trainable," are often based on the facts and procedures of job knowledge. Competencies that involve reasoning, language, or social skills require more individual ability to develop but can be moderately trainable. Competencies grounded in motivation and mental style are largely dependent on individual talent and do not improve much as a result of training.

Federal employees often do not consider competency trainability when seeking training opportunities. In a time of resource scarcity, training funds may be spent more effectively if employees and supervisors are better informed about which competencies are likely to improve as a result of training. The following strategies may be useful to help inform them.

*In a time of resource scarcity, training funds may be spent more effectively if employees and supervisors are better informed about which competencies are likely to improve as a result of training.*

**Highlight trainability.** Competency trainability should be considered whenever employees and supervisors discuss training. Because this issue affects the entire Federal workforce, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) should provide guidance that helps make these discussions effective. Key OPM messages could specify which competencies are less trainable, the effects of individual abilities on training, and how these factors should affect training decisions.

OPM training specialists could build on the success of the agency's web-based Assessment Decision Guide[1] by creating a similar online Employee Development Guide. The new guide could educate agency personnel about competency trainability, use of prerequisite requirements and pretesting to establish employee readiness to learn, effective instructional design, and other information needed to make good training decisions.

**Train supervisors.** MSPB's research finds that Federal employees trust their supervisors—more than they trust agency policymakers.[2] This is not surprising. Supervisors are the front-line contact with employees and deal with a number of potentially sensitive issues, including training requests. Therefore, supervisors are ideally placed to discuss competency trainability with their employees and make sure it is considered before training requests are approved.

Supervisor training typically includes topics such as employee development strategies and how to evaluate employee abilities and performance. Future supervisor training should also cover competency trainability. This training will be particularly effective if it is accompanied by centrally available guidance on how to make the most of it.

**Plan for training.** MSPB's Merit Principles Survey results show that pre-training planning is associated with a reduced tendency to pursue training for less trainable competencies. This makes sense because discussions between supervisors and employees about near-term training opportunities will likely touch upon employee strengths and weaknesses. When conducted with preparation and insight, such discussions include supervisor recommendations about what training experiences an employee seems well-prepared to undertake. By advising pursuit of realistic goals, supervisors may steer employees away from training in less trainable competencies.

OPM, agencies, and supervisors can set employees' expectations about training more appropriately by using these strategies to inform them about competency trainability. This should reduce the number of requests for training in competencies that are not trainable, thereby saving agencies money and other resources. ❖

[1]Available on the Web at http://apps.opm.gov/ADT/content.aspx.

[2]U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *Accomplishing Our Mission: Results of the Merit Principles Survey 2005*, Washington, DC, February 2007.

# Striving for Advancement: Clear Skies or Clouds Ahead?

In 1992, MSPB published *A Question of Equity: Women and the Glass Ceiling in the Federal Government*, which examined the status and advancement of women in the Federal Government. We concluded that many women faced a glass ceiling that hindered their advancement and prevented the Federal Government from fully utilizing their skills and abilities. That was then—but what about now? MSPB has conducted a follow-up study to be released this year that reveals a more positive picture.

*Women are increasingly confident that they are judged on their merits*. Double standards and stereotypes are incompatible with the merit principle of basing selection and advancement on relative ability. Survey results indicate that the Federal Government has made progress in treating employees fairly and eliminating sex-based biases. In most aspects of employment, women and men were equally likely to report that they had been treated fairly, although men remain much more likely than women to believe that Federal workplaces are gender-neutral as shown in Table 1.

*Women are increasingly comparable to men in terms of experience and education*. Results from MSPB's Career Advancement Survey indicate that both women and men are interested in advancement, and data show that women and men will compete for that advancement on increasingly equal terms. As shown in Table 2, differences between women and men in experience and education have diminished considerably.

*Pay differences have diminished but not disappeared.* Salary differences between women and men continue to shrink. The gains have been greatest in administrative occupations, where the median salary for women is now almost 93 percent of that for men, up from just over 83 percent in 1991; professional occupations have shown a modest gain from about 82 to 85 percent. However, differences remain, in part because men still outnumber women in supervisory positions and in high-paying occupations such as surgeon, engineer, or air traffic controller. But even within an occupation, salaries for women are often lower, on average, than those for men. The Government Accountability Office found that salary differences cannot be completely explained by measurable differences in factors such as education and experience.[2]

Thus, the skies depicted by our research are clearing, but are not yet completely clear. Discrimination is still reported, albeit with decreasing frequency. Also, discrimination is not the only barrier to fair treatment reported by employees. Many women and men believe that favoritism plays a frequent and improper role in many personnel decisions. But the message from surveys and statistics is clear: the careers of contemporary Federal employees are less likely to be clouded by sex-based inequities than were the careers of their predecessors. ❖

[1]The 1991 survey was administered to a sample of employees at or above the GS-9 grade level. The 2007 figures are for employees at comparable grade or pay levels.
[2]See U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Women's Pay: Gender Pay Gap in the Federal Workforce Narrows as Differences in Occupation, Education, and Experience Diminish,* GAO-09-279, Washington, DC, March 2009.

**Table 1. Agreement with statements about the work environment and work expectations, 1991 Career Development Survey and 2007 Career Advancement Survey[1]**

| Statement | Group | 1991 | 2007 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Women and men are respected equally. | Women | 30% | 40% |
| | Men | 51% | 56% |
| Standards are higher for women than they are for men. | Women | 45% | 33% |
| | Men | 5% | 4% |

**Table 2. Educational attainment and Federal experience for women and men in professional and administrative occupations**

| Characteristic | Group | 1991 | 2009 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Four-year (bachelor's) or higher degree | Women | 52% | 60% |
| | Men | 74% | 69% |
| Average length of service | Women | 13.5 yrs | 16.4 yrs |
| | Men | 15.9 yrs | 15.5 yrs |

# MSPB's Results Are In

MSPB recently published its FY 2010 Annual Report which provides an overview of adjudication activities, summaries of significant Board decisions, and detailed case processing results.

The agency took significant actions in FY 2010 to improve the transparency of its adjudication processes and decisions. As summarized in the report, the Board heard oral arguments for the first time in over 20 years in cases with broad impact on the Government's merit systems. *Conyers v. Department of Defense* and *Northover v. Department of Defense* dealt with the Board's jurisdiction in reviewing adverse action cases involving the agency's revocation of a tenured employee's eligibility to hold a non-critical sensitive position. *Aguzie, et al. v. Office of Personnel Management* was a set of cases involving the application of Title 5, U.S.C., Chapter 75 to cases in which OPM initiated removal of tenured employees based on suitability grounds. Also, the Board began issuing expanded explanations of its rationale in non-published decisions on Petitions for Review to promote parties' understanding of those decisions.

As a service to our stakeholders, the report includes important decisions released in early FY 2011, including decisions on the oral arguments described above. In addition, the report includes a summary of the November 2010 decisions in *Dean v. OPM* and *Evans v. Veterans Affairs*—two cases involving veterans' rights under the Federal Career Intern Program and that ultimately resulted in the termination of the intern program. It also includes a summary of *Chambers v. Department of Interior*—a high profile case involving whistleblower protections.

The MSPB issued 7,863 decisions in FY 2010. Of the 6,536 initial appeals processed, 57 percent were dismissed for jurisdiction or timeliness. Of the remaining cases not dismissed, 63 percent were resolved through alternative dispute resolution procedures. Of the 1,024 decisions adjudicated on the merits, 76 percent affirmed the agency's decision, 21 percent were overturned, 2 percent were mitigated and 1 percent was otherwise resolved.

At headquarters, the Board issued 779 decisions. Of the 639 Petitions for Review of Initial Decisions (PFRs) considered by the Board, 63 percent were denied, 16 percent were granted, 11 percent were denied but reopened by the Board, and 10 percent were settled or dismissed. Of the 104 PFRs that were granted by the Board, 75 percent were remanded for a new decision, 14 percent were affirmed, 9 percent were reversed, and the remaining 2 percent of cases had other outcomes. MSPB continued to issue reasonable and supportable decisions as evidenced by the fact that the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit concurred with over 90 percent of MSPB decisions that were appealed to the Court. ❖

# Telework

*(continued from page 1)*

provides employees and supervisors with guidance on telework practices (e.g., telework deployment considerations, communicating and collaborating in a remote environment, planning work, performance management).

The last element is developing a cycle of continuous improvement. For the most part, telework was initiated on a limited basis through pilot programs that consisted of employees with specific types of jobs or working in a specific unit. Using feedback solicited through focus groups, surveys, or online comments, the interviewees evaluated results, identified improvement strategies, incorporated lessons learned, and expanded the number of participants. Each interviewed organization also maintains metrics to determine how well the telework program meets its stated goals. For instance, they look at the ability to continue operations during emergency situations, attract and retain employees with specific skill sets, reduce real estate and related costs, reduce traffic congestion and carbon emissions, and improve employee work/life balance. All of their telework programs have been incrementally expanded, and they continuously look for ways to improve their results. ❖

**Contact Information for MSPB Interviewees**

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**Director's Perspective.** *The Director looks at OPM's new Governmentwide assessment tools. (Page 2)*

***Academically Adrift* College Graduates.** *Researchers from New York University and the University of Virginia find that college graduates may not be developing the kinds of skills agencies need. (Page 4)*

**What Training is Most Likely to Succeed?** *MSPB's most recent report looks at how agencies can make good training decisions based on the trainability of particular competencies. (Page 5)*

**Women's Advancement in the Federal Government.** *MSPB research demonstrates that women have made great progress in terms of equity and advancement—but more can be done. (Page 6)*

**Transparency, Decisions, and Impact.** *A look at MSPB's accomplishments over the past year. (Page 7)*