

ISSUES OF MERIT

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Emotional Labor at Work

What are Federal agencies doing to support employees who perform emotionally laborious work?

In previous editions of *Issues of Merit*, the Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) discussed the prevalence of emotionally laborious work in Federal jobs and how emotional fatigue can negatively affect important work outcomes, including discretionary effort, intent to quit, and job performance. Given that emotional labor is required for many Federal jobs, we asked agencies about the types of emotional labor their workforce performs and the strategies they use to ensure that employees are emotionally buttressed against the stressors and strains of those emotionally challenging jobs.

It is important to realize that many Federal employees work in highly stressful environments that require them to control both their emotions and to respond appropriately to the emotions of those in various states of anxiety and distress. For instance, we heard from medical organizations in which employees work with patients who have serious physical or mental illnesses. These jobs require the ability to show compassion on a daily basis despite difficult interactions and patient death. Employees can also experience compassion fatigue because it is difficult to hear about patient trauma daily without taking on trauma vicariously through the patient.

Investigative work is another field that is subject to high levels of emotional labor and compassion fatigue, for instance, when dealing with crimes against children or other vulnerable populations. In addition, when employees serve in combat zones or other high-stress locations, they could be subject to greater levels of emotional labor and fatigue because of concerns about safety for themselves, their families, and those they serve. These are just a few examples of the type of emotional work we ask Federal employees to perform on a daily basis.

In terms of what agencies are doing to relieve emotional fatigue, most agencies reported having employee assistance programs to help employees deal with the stress of their jobs. Many also reported having other health and wellness programs, flexible work-life balance options, unscheduled leave, and distressed employee hotlines. Some agencies indicated they have stress management courses, peer support, and chaplaincy programs. In addition, some agency representatives reported that, to the extent possible, they adjust workloads to decrease emotional fatigue, provide flexibility whenever possible in work assignments, and respond to requests for a change in population or service provided.

ISSUES OF MERIT

U.S. Merit Systems
Protection Board

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Our Mission

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

Issues of Merit

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

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Sometimes, just a show of support can help. One agency representative told us: “I personally check in with staff regularly about their compassion fatigue, have provided education on compassion fatigue and how to take care of yourself, and try to help staff via case consultation/staffings about difficult cases so we can talk about compassion, transference, and counter-transference issues that might arise and complicate the emotional labor the staff might be feeling.”

In addition to these individual tactics, several agencies have instituted leading-edge programs to help manage emotional labor and stress. The Department of State’s High Stress Outbrief Program was designed to help Foreign Service Officers and specialist employees coming back from service at high-threat, high-risk posts to reintegrate with family, friends, and everyday life and introduce resources available to assist with the process.

In another example, Homeland Security Investigations recently implemented ARMOR (Awareness and Resilience Mentoring for Operational Readiness: a Safeguard Program for Child Exploitation Investigations) that includes orientation and pre-exposure training for employees who will be exposed to potentially traumatic events and images.

The U.S. Department of Justice’s Federal Bureau of Investigation offers a number of wellness programs including the Crisis Intervention Program (CIP) and Post Critical Incident Seminar (PCIS) to heighten the awareness of employees regarding common stressors related to their job, possible reactions they may experience, and available resources to assist. The CIP teams deploy to provide services like psychological first aid, debriefing, and counseling through licensed mental health professionals and chaplains. The PCIS program provides follow-up for those in the identified “highly impacted groups” and provides 3 days of instructional and experiential learning which offer coping skills to mitigate or effectively deal with the potential for emotional labor.

The U.S. Marshals Service (USMS) uses its Employee Resiliency Program (ERP) to deliver training, education, and preventative services that are designed to foster resilience within the USMS workforce. The goal is to build resilience within USMS personnel to proactively manage stress in response to traumatic situations. The ERP offers preemptive educational tools to employees and family members to alleviate stressful situations, decrease stress, and reduce anxiety.

As Government provides direct services to persons in varying states of emotional distress, the employees who deliver such service must engage in various degrees of emotional labor. Emotional labor exerted for too long can cause emotional fatigue which can present challenges to service delivery. Fortunately, there are things agencies are doing to support these employees in increasingly emotionally demanding workplaces. To learn more about emotional labor, emotional fatigue, and steps agencies can take to help employees, see our recent research brief, *Managing Employees to Perform Emotionally Laborious Work*. ❖

Thanks to all of our stakeholders and readers for taking the time to provide your valuable ideas for our new research agenda. We are working on finalizing the agenda and hope to share it with you soon!

Get Ready, It's Performance Appraisal Time

It is September, and agencies across the Federal Government are gearing up to do annual performance appraisals. Employees are scrambling to summarize their contributions. Supervisors are preparing to write lengthy narratives to justify summary ratings and ratings of record. Then they will sit down to discuss final ratings. At best, discussions will cover topics such as the employee's progress, strengths, improvement areas, and training needs. Too often they will be short exchanges to inform employees of the rating and obtain a signature. We need to ask what we get from this exercise. Does it help improve performance, identify poor performers, motivate employees to do a better job, or recognize top performers? Responses to MSPB's 2016 Merit Principles Survey (MPS) suggest that the answer to those questions is no.

Sixty-three percent of respondents felt that their appraisal was an accurate reflection of their performance. That is not an overwhelming endorsement of the exercise, and the numbers go down from there: 57 percent agreed that their annual performance review helped identify their strengths; 55 percent agreed that the standards used to appraise their performance are appropriate; 46 percent agreed it helped identify weaknesses; 44 percent agreed it made them feel more enthusiastic about their work; 39 percent felt that differences in work unit performance are recognized in a meaningful way; and 24 percent felt that the organization addresses poor performers effectively. We also found that the responses to most of these questions were not significantly influenced by the number of levels in the respondents' appraisal system.

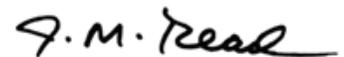
In addition, 2017 Federal workforce data suggests that the annual performance rating does not do a good job of making distinctions in employee performance. Over 99 percent of all permanent, full-time employees received at least a fully successful rating. For those agencies with 5-level appraisal systems, about 75 percent of employees were rated in the top two levels. Even in systems with only 3 levels, where the top rating should be reserved for the top performers, almost half were rated at the top level. Also, MPS results show that supervisors do not find the appraisal to be particularly helpful in managing development, promotions, retention, or dealing with poor performers.

Considering the time, resources, and effort that go into the current performance appraisal process, we need to ask if there is a better way. I believe there is. First, agencies should focus more on communication and less on annual grades. The performance management process should let employees know how they are doing, acknowledge exceptional work in a timely manner, and identify problem performance early and try to correct it. These goals cannot be met through 1-2 performance discussions per year. Communication needs to happen continually throughout the year.

Second, agencies need to choose the number of appraisal levels that work for their organization. In the spirit of simplicity, a 2- or 3-level system would probably meet the needs of most organizations. In 2-level systems, where employees are either performing unsuccessfully or successfully, employees and supervisors can focus on constructive discussions about performance instead of how the performance translates into a summary or annual "grade." Adding a third level gives employers the opportunity to acknowledge the superstars in the organization.

Using a 2- or 3-level appraisal does mean that most employees will fall in the "fully successful" range. Since employees don't typically enjoy being called average, this change will require a cultural shift in the organization. The best place to start that shift is with awards. Supervisors often rely on annual performance awards to make distinctions in employee performance. However, research indicates that providing recognition in real time, such as through special act awards, is far more effective than dividing award budgets once per year, long after accomplishments have been achieved. In fact, the Office of Personnel Management also recently urged agencies to revisit their use of special act awards.

Finally, there are now technological solutions available to help supervisors better administer performance management systems. They go beyond just automating the paper-intensive appraisal process and provide tools to help define measurable performance standards, communicate work progress, share real-time feedback, identify problems early, provide ongoing coaching, and evaluate and recognize employees. Appraisals are just one aspect of performance management, but they tend to get more time, attention, and energy than more important pieces of the system, like setting goals, communication, and recognition. This is just something to ponder as we embark on this annual exercise. ❖



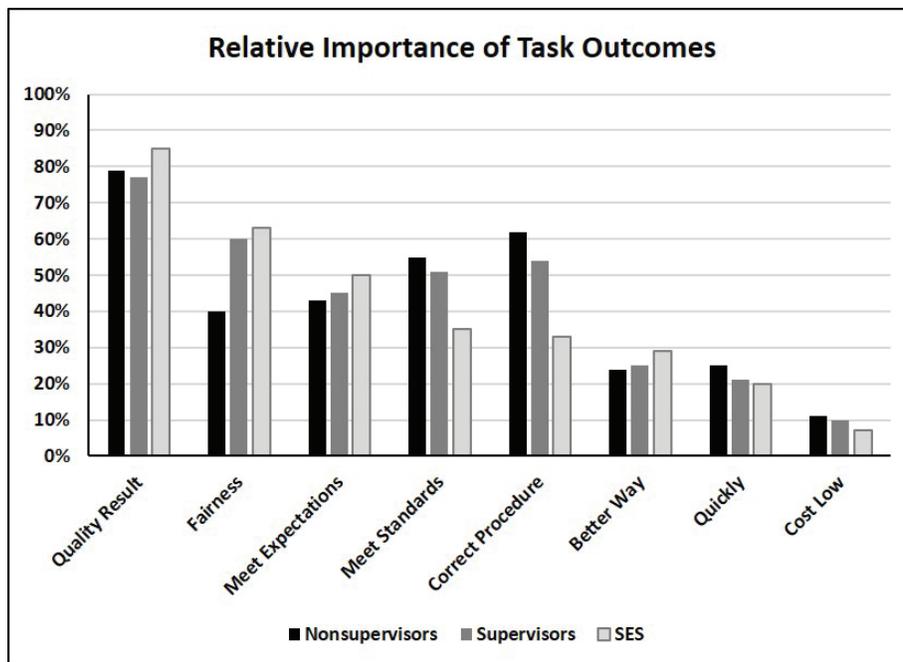
Director, Policy and Evaluation

What Are the Most Important Work Outcomes?

Groups of employees sometimes have different priorities based on their leadership role.

Completing work is a complicated process. There are many ways to carry out a particular project, and not everyone involved in the project may agree on the priorities. Previous MSPB research has emphasized the importance of clear communication among employees, supervisors, and senior executives to ensure effective performance. However, it is difficult to cultivate clear communication if the different levels of the organization have different priorities.

To investigate how priorities differ across organizational levels, we asked MPS 2016 participants to rate the importance of the following eight outcomes of a work task: *producing a high-quality result, dealing with coworkers fairly, meeting the expectations of management, meeting a specification or standard, following the correct procedure, finding a better way to do the task, completing the task quickly, and keeping the cost low*. The chart below summarizes which outcomes respondents rated as highest priority based on the respondent's level of supervisory responsibility (non-supervisors, supervisors, and members of the Senior Executive Service (SES)). Several patterns emerged.



First, all three groups value producing a high-quality result. In fact, this was the outcome that received the highest level of agreement in all three groups. That is important because it indicates an area of general agreement about what the most important outcome of a work product is. What tends to differ, however, is what the members of each group think goes into achieving a quality result. Employees with different leadership experience have different priorities when they plan, perform, and evaluate the success of the same work.

For instance, there are several outcomes that decrease in importance as leadership responsibility increases, including meeting a specification or standard, using the correct procedures, doing work quickly, and keeping costs low. On the other hand, there are several outcomes that increase in importance as leadership responsibilities grow, such as treating the workforce fairly, meeting management expectations, and finding better ways to do a task.

It is interesting to note that the least important outcome for all three groups was keeping costs low. The cause of this result is likely that agency employees producing work outcomes often have little control over budgets. Executives can argue for funds for particular projects, but budget decisions are generally made by the top levels of the organization, the Office of Management and Budget, and Congress.

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Overall, the outcomes that employees valued most (after producing a high-quality result) were meeting a specification or standard and using the correct procedures. It makes sense that someone in a line position is most concerned with output-related goals because their job is directly related to the production of the work product.

Senior executives, on the other hand, were most concerned with meeting organizational expectations and dealing with the workforce fairly. It is not surprising that executives value outcomes that are more closely related to broader organizational goals.

Supervisor responses fell directly between those of nonsupervisors and executives on almost every outcome. This demonstrates that as employees progress up the chain of command, they start to think about work differently and start prioritizing different outcomes.

Management sometimes has goals that cannot be achieved by following standard procedures—and in turn, they may be slower to recognize when these procedures are crucial for safety or compliance reasons. There is also a direct trade-off in many tasks between finishing quickly and working in a more reflective manner that explores alternatives. Finally, concerns about fairness in distribution of work and opportunities may lead supervisors and other leaders to make staffing decisions that can seem at odds with other outcomes.

Such differences in perspective among executives, supervisors, and nonsupervisors may lead to incompatible expectations and potential disagreements about how work tasks are to be performed, which could in turn result in disagreements over the quality of the work product. Recognizing and resolving such differences in expectations should be a skill employees in every role strive to develop. ❖

RECENT MSPB PUBLICATIONS

Although MSPB has not been able to release official reports to the President and Congress due to the lack of a quorum, we have still been busy releasing research briefs we think will be interesting and helpful to our stakeholders. Check them out at our website, www.mspb.gov/studies, under “Other Publications.”

Managing Employees to Perform Emotionally Laborious Work: Data from our 2016 MPS indicates that when employees need to hide their emotions, or pretend to feel other emotions, it negatively affects intent to stay, performance behaviors, appraisal results, and engagement. See what agencies do to reduce the need to pretend or hide emotions when the work itself is emotional.

Remedying Unacceptable Employee Performance in the Federal Civil Service: For decades, the Federal Government has been seeking useful means to address the issue of Federal employees whose performance at work is unacceptable. See why some employees perform badly and how effective various approaches are in bringing about the necessary improvements in performance.

The Perceived Incidence of Prohibited Personnel Practices: The law contains 14 prohibited personnel practices (PPPs) with potential consequences for offenders who commit one or more. But, are agencies truly preventing PPPs, and what are the consequences for the effectiveness of the civil service if employees believe that PPPs are allowed to occur? This research brief uses data from our 2016 MPS to discuss respondents’ perceptions that they have seen a PPP and the relationship between such perceptions and their views of a variety of workplace issues.

Improving Federal Leadership Through Better Probationary Practices: When used properly, the probationary period can help ensure that the Federal Government has qualified, competent leaders. This perspectives brief examines how the supervisory and managerial probationary periods are being used by agencies, identifies what barriers exist to using them more effectively, and builds on prior MSPB research to discuss what steps agencies can take to improve Federal leadership through better probationary practices.

OPM Studies Excepted Service Hiring

Is the grass greener on the other side of competitive hiring?

In July 2018, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) released the study *Excepted Service Hiring Authorities: Their Use and Effectiveness in the Executive Branch*. The excepted service provides a more flexible approach to hiring to support agency mission needs when it is “impracticable” to apply traditional competitive examining methods. The purpose of the study was to assess: (1) the extent to which agencies use title 5 excepted service hiring authorities; (2) the effectiveness of these hiring policies and practices; and (3) compliance with related laws and regulations.

OPM’s findings demonstrate that excepted service hiring has many of the same issues seen in competitive service hiring, despite the fact that these authorities are intended to make hiring simpler and more tailored to the needs of the agency. These challenges largely fall into two areas: (1) agencies do not comply with some of the requirements under excepted hiring, and (2) agencies do not use some of the flexibilities permitted under excepted hiring.

In terms of compliance, OPM was not able to fully determine if agencies are adhering to the merit system principles and relevant public policies because of a lack of documentation in a couple of areas. For instance, about half of the recruitment actions OPM reviewed contained only the resume of the selectee(s) and no information on other applicants, specific recruitment sources used, or even information about how the selectee was identified. This makes it difficult to ascertain if agencies are adhering to the intent of the merit principles associated with fair and open competition and the fair and equitable treatment of all applicants.

In addition, OPM found that many agencies had not established required policies for several excepted service hiring operations. For instance, only 56 percent of the agencies included in OPM’s policy review had the required guidelines describing how they handle applications for excepted service hiring; only 40 percent had policies for how to apply priority reemployment rights; and only half had a documented process for granting veterans’ preference. Lack of documentation and policies make it difficult to determine not only compliance with hiring rules and adherence to merit, but also whether agencies are implementing “more strategic, innovative, and targeted recruitment activities” than they could under competitive examining.

OPM also examined the extent to which agencies are using the hiring flexibilities afforded under excepted service hiring. OPM found that agencies were not using the vast majority of excepted service hiring authorities available to them. Specifically, 92 percent of excepted service appointments made between FY 2012–2016 used 11 of the 51 legal authorities. Low-use and non-use of a large number of authorities may indicate an opportunity to streamline the number of hiring authorities available to agencies. This finding echoes MSPB’s recommendation to streamline and consolidate competitive hiring authorities to make the process more transparent and understandable, found in our 2006 report *Reforming Federal Hiring: Beyond Cheaper and Faster*.

Another area where agencies do not make optimal use of excepted flexibilities is in defining qualifications. The purpose of excepted authorities is to allow agencies to create the most practical assessment tools and/or methods when hiring for those positions. In fact, agencies are required to use agency-unique qualification standards or modified OPM standards to fit their specific needs for many positions. However, OPM found that a large number of agencies are simply applying established OPM qualification standards. MSPB pointed out in the report *Identifying Talent through Technology—Automated Hiring Systems in Federal Agencies* that using generic qualification standards and specialized experience definitions for competitive hiring reduce the ability to identify the best qualified applicants. The ability to create unique standards was intended to help overcome this challenge.

Finally, OPM found that hiring managers lack involvement in the hiring process. While 86 percent of the hiring managers responding to its survey reported being involved in interviewing applicants, most had no role in earlier stages of the hiring process. In fact, only 46 percent reported being involved with recruitment, 37 percent involved in the development of job analyses, and 34 percent helped develop assessment criteria.

MSPB’s report *Federal Appointing Authorities: Cutting Through the Confusion* reported that supervisors are more satisfied with the results of the hiring process when they are involved. We also found that it is important for hiring

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managers to understand which hiring authority is being used because not knowing can cause confusion regarding assessment, training, and probation requirements for the position. Therefore, the Federal Government needs to do a better job training supervisors in their hiring responsibilities and including them in the process.

More and more, it seems, agencies are asking for hiring flexibilities that exempt them from competitive service hiring requirements. OPM's report indicates, however, that even when hiring flexibilities exist, agencies are not necessarily using them; and when they do, they are not necessarily using them properly. ❖

Locality Pay: What Is It and How Prevalent Is Its Use?

To many Federal employees, locality pay is an enigma. There are a lot of questions and misconceptions about what it is, who gets it, and how that decision is made. Here is a quick primer on locality pay.

When General Schedule employees receive annual pay adjustments, there is a separate adjustment for base pay and locality pay. Base-pay adjustments are determined using a specific formula prescribed under statute. Locality adjustments are based on surveys conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) and differ depending on where the employee's job is located. However, contrary to what many people think, locality adjustments are NOT calculated on cost of living.

Locality adjustments are calculated using comparisons of Federal salary to non-Federal salary for similar types and levels of work in a particular geographic location. Therefore, the calculation is based on cost of labor rather than cost of living. The Federal Salary Council (FSC) is an advisory body comprised of experts in labor relations and pay policy as well as representatives from employee unions. The FSC makes recommendations to the President's Pay Agent regarding the establishment or modification of pay locality areas, the process for making pay comparisons, and the level of locality pay for each area based on the pay gaps determined by the BLS surveys. The President's Pay Agent is a group composed of the Secretary of Labor and the Directors of the Office of Management and Budget and OPM. They make the final determination regarding the establishment or modification of locality pay areas and make the final recommendation to the President regarding the level of local pay differentials.

In 2018, there were 46 locality pay areas (there are 52 as of 2019). Employees not covered in one of those areas are included in the "Rest of U.S." locality pay designation. Almost 80 percent of Federal employees were covered by locality pay in 2018. The figure below shows how many employees were covered under each of the major locality pay areas and the "Rest of U.S." in 2018.



Federal compensation in general is a contentious topic. The current processes for determining base and locality adjustments were intended to provide a fairer basis for compensating Federal employees. Not many think these processes are the final answer to implementing equal pay for work of equal value, but for now, it's what we have. ❖



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