

Issues of Merit

A Publication of the Office of Policy and Evaluation, U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board

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Director's Perspective

The Future of Public Service

A few years ago a friend of mine gave me a lapel button that declared (I think tongue-in-cheek), "Optimistic—even in the face of reality." I plead guilty to the first part of that message. I also work hard, however, at trying to be sure that there is some basis for my optimism. It is with this thought, therefore, that I share a new year's prediction: there is definitely a future for the federal public service and it could be a bright one. But note the use of the word "could."

MSPB's studies of the federal civil service over the last two decades have documented an impressive list of challenges that the federal government must meet if it is to attract, motivate, and retain the high quality workforce that the nation needs and deserves. An aging workforce, skills imbalances, ineffective recruitment strategies, and an inflexible compensation system are a few of those challenges. Nonetheless, there are a number of reasons why the next several years could be the beginning of a much needed revitalization for the federal workforce. Unfortunately, the next several years could just as easily become known as the continuation of a downward spiral in the capacity of the federal workforce to carry out its many missions on behalf of the nation.

So—what is the basis for my optimism regarding the future of public service? And what are my caveats? First of all, there is no denying that the tragic events of September 11 dramatically raised the nation's awareness that highly capable and committed public employees are absolutely vital to the national interest. National polls taken before and shortly after the attacks, for

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OPE Focus on the Facts

Belief:

Federal managers are reluctant to select veterans for vacant positions and often would rather select nobody than select a veteran.

Fact:

Federal managers have such a good track record in employing veterans that the proportion of veterans in the federal workforce actually far surpasses veterans' representation in the civilian labor force. More than one in every four feds (26 percent) have veterans preference, while only about one in every 10 individuals (11 percent) in the civilian labor force is a veteran.

Source: OPM's Annual Report to Congress on Veterans Employment in the Federal Government, FY 2000.

New Report Cites Drawbacks to OPM's Dual Role

In a report to be published early this year, the Merit Systems Protection Board cites OPM's dual statutory responsibilities as both the fair, impartial leader of the civil service and the advocate of administration HRM policies as one of the underlying conditions that contribute to OPM's real and perceived deficiencies.

The report, "The U.S. Office of Personnel Management in Retrospect: Achievements and Challenges After Two Decades," looks back on OPM's first 20 years in operation and praises the agency for its HRM oversight program, its successful efforts to decentralize and delegate personnel authority to departments and agencies, its stewardship of federal employee insurance programs, and its successful affirmative action initiatives and family-friendly policies.

But the report also highlights OPM's lack of progress in addressing long-standing problems in the

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example, illustrate a dramatic change. Before the attacks only 42 percent of Americans thought of government as “our government” (versus “the government”), while after the attacks, a substantial 68 percent majority viewed it as “our government.” While this is a positive development, a shift in public opinion is not in itself a sufficient basis for optimism. Over time, public support of government will erode if we return to business as usual and bureaucrat bashing.

More encouraging is the fact that well before September 2001 there were a number of federal policymakers and others who were focusing—and who continue to focus—on a crisis in the federal workforce. Again, this may not seem like a cause for optimism except that problem recognition is an essential precursor to problem resolution, and we seem to be making progress at least on the first part of the equation. In December 2000 Senator George Voinovich issued a report to the President on “The Crisis in Human Capital.” In January 2001, GAO added strategic human capital

management to the list of federal programs identified as being high risk. Senators Joseph Lieberman and Fred Thompson and others have joined with David Walker, the U.S. Comptroller General, in expressing their concerns about the future of the public service. In August 2001, OMB released “The President’s Management Agenda,” which laid out five governmentwide initiatives, the first of which addresses the need to better deal with the “strategic management of human capital.” Some significant legislative proposals in this regard have already been put on the table.

The aspect of this situation that gives me hope is that meaningful advances in the federal civil service historically have come about following a coalescing of opinions that 1) the status quo is no longer acceptable, and 2) the desired direction of change is towards strengthening the civil service. While there is not yet a clear consensus on the details of the changes needed, there is general agreement that one outcome should be that the federal government becomes an employer of choice for talented, dedicated Americans.

The caveat I must add to my note of optimism is that even the best of

intentions can lead nowhere without leadership, commitment, resources, and follow-through. The bad news, therefore, is that those who are pessimistic about the future of the public service can find a basis for that pessimism. The good news is that we can decide which future we want and we can do something about it.

Note: This is my last “Director’s Column” for *Issues of Merit*. After almost 34 years of a very fulfilling federal career, I am retiring from the federal government as of early January 2002. I am not retiring from public service, however, since I have joined the Partnership for Public Service, a new non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to revitalizing the federal civil service. I will continue, therefore, to pursue the same worthy goals that motivated me during my federal career, especially during the last 20-plus years with MSPB. I also leave behind at MSPB a very talented and dedicated group of federal employees and friends who will continue the excellent service to America that has been their hallmark.

John M. Palguta
Director, Policy and Evaluation

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staffing and compensation areas, noting that the government’s classification program hasn’t changed since World War II, although the nature of work has changed tremendously. Similarly, despite years of managers’ complaints about the unwieldiness of federal staffing procedures, there have been no major systemic changes that make it much faster or much easier to fill jobs.

The Board’s report suggests that OPM’s attempts to remedy such problems sometimes reflect the balance it has to maintain

between its responsibilities as leader of the civil service and its role as the president’s HR policymaker. It may not always be possible to strike a good balance between the long-term best interests of the civil service and the vision of a given presidential administration. Attempting to please constituencies with conflicting agendas can result in progress that comes excruciatingly slowly, if at all. It’s little wonder, under such circumstances, that today we often hear the same criticisms about how hard it is to fill federal jobs quickly and with

good candidates that we heard when the Office of Personnel Management first opened for business over twenty years ago.

The report is the third in MSPB’s “Perspectives” series. To be notified about this and other publications, you may subscribe to our new MSPB studies list server under “Studies,” on the MSPB web site at www.mspb.gov. Reports may also be requested in writing, by phone, or by e-mail. See page 6 for information on obtaining publications.

Understanding Minority-Nonminority Attitude Differences

Over the years, MSPB surveys of the federal workforce have revealed a marked difference between the views of minorities and nonminorities on important issues. For example, as the figure below shows, a substantial percentage of minority employees in the federal government believe that they are subject to “flagrant or obviously discriminatory practices.” In contrast, very few whites believe that minorities in the federal government are the victims of discrimination. The question that this raises is, “why the great discrepancy between the views of minorities and nonminorities?”

A recent survey conducted by the Washington Post, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University has identified at least a part of the reason for these differences. What those researchers found was that whether out of hostility, indifference, or a simple lack of knowledge, large numbers of white Americans incorrectly believe minorities are as well off as whites in terms of their

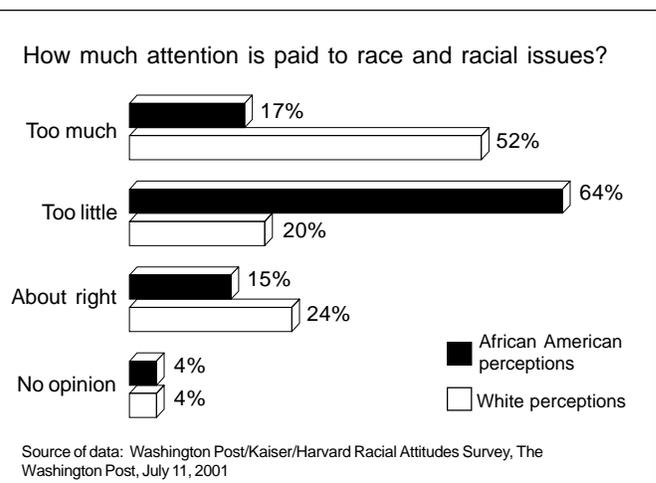
jobs, incomes, schooling, and health care (Richard Morin, The Washington Post, July 11, 2001). The researchers found that many whites mistakenly believe that the average African American is doing as well as, or even better than, the average white.

The facts are, however, contrary to the belief of many whites. For example, research clearly shows that compared to whites, African Americans as a group:

- have less access to health care;
- have lower levels of education;
- hold different types of jobs; and
- are paid lower salaries.

The Board’s own research is consistent with this pattern.

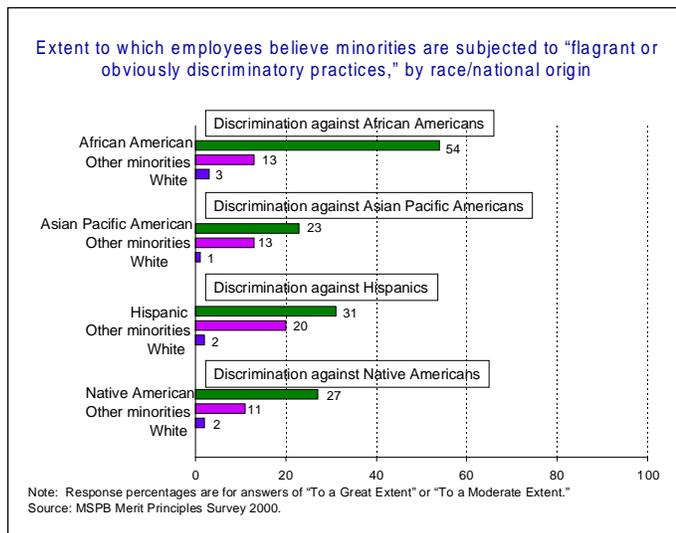
Although minorities in the federal government have for the last decade been promoted at the same rate as whites, they are not represented at proportional rates in higher graded jobs. Minority employees often do not receive as many awards as white employees, and they are disciplined at a much higher rate.



One of the consequences of these beliefs is shown in the figure above. Since many whites incorrectly believe that social equity has been achieved, it is not surprising that they also think that less attention should be paid to racial issues than do minorities. And minorities, for their part, may overlook the progress that minority workers have made. For example, although promotion rates of minorities and whites in the federal government are equal, many minorities do not believe this to be the case.

According to the Washington Post-sponsored study, as the number of minorities in the middle class has grown, more whites see minorities as living in conditions equivalent to

Unfortunately, although the government has made great strides in its the treatment of minorities, true social equity has not yet been achieved. Therefore, it might be helpful if all employees examine their attitudes and whether their beliefs reflect reality.



Where You Work Does Make A Difference

While most people would agree that the government is large and multifaceted, with many components and a great diversity of functions, they might not recognize how large a difference there can be in the attitudes and perceptions of employees who work in different parts of the government. The table below shows that there can be sizable differences among agencies in employee attitudes about their work and their work environment.

Undoubtedly, working in an environment where 70 percent of employees feel they are treated

agency with the higher percentage of positive responses is not necessarily the more flexible one. It all depends on how much flexibility each agency started with. Similarly, the agency where 62 percent of respondents said the productivity of their work unit had improved may simply have had more room for improvement than other agencies where fewer employees report improvement.

So, where you work does make a difference. However, the factors that contribute to making an organization a good place to work are complex. Therefore, discovering *why* the difference exists is an important component in judging which are the best organizations.

Selected results from MSPB Merit Principles Survey 2000 comparing agencies with the highest and lowest percentages of agreement.

Survey Item	Percent of Respondents Agreeing	
	Highest Percentage	Lowest Percentage
I have been treated fairly regarding annual performance appraisals.	70	33
I have been treated fairly regarding awards.	54	23
At the place I work, my opinions seem to count.	73	43
I have been given more flexibility in how I accomplish my work.	63	33
The productivity of my work unit has improved.	62	32
The standards used to evaluate my performance are fair.	63	35
Recognition and rewards are based on merit in my work unit.	49	22

Note: Data are based on responses from 22 departments and independent agencies.

fairly regarding performance appraisals is very different from working in an organization where just 33 percent of workers feel they are treated fairly. And it has to be much more rewarding to work in an organization where 73 percent of employees say their opinions count versus working in an organization where only 43 percent feel that way.

But you have to be careful about making assumptions based on these data. For example, the percentage of respondents indicating that they had been given more flexibility to accomplish work ranged from 33 percent to 63 percent. But the

Study Examines Federal Vacancy Announcements

Preliminary information obtained in connection with the Board's current study of federal vacancy announcements suggests that federal agencies are keeping the government's automated employment information job bank (www.usajobs.opm.gov) pretty busy. In fiscal year 2001 agencies posted a total of 188,273 job announcements on USAJOBS, despite a hiring

freeze imposed by the President in January of that year. Most of these jobs (88 percent) were white-collar positions such as information technology specialists, nurses, engineers, accountants, business analysts, and office clerks. A smattering of blue-collar and senior executive jobs were posted as well. About 60 percent of the announcements were open to everyone. The rest were open only to internal candidates. Ten departments posted 75 percent of the vacancy announcements. Those agencies were Army, Interior, Agriculture, Air Force, Health and Human Services, Navy, Justice, Treasury, Commerce, and Defense.

Agencies tended to advertise the most vacancies soon after their appropriations had been approved: three-fourths of job vacancies were announced in December through April. There was hardly any activity after April, but the pace picked up again during August and September, probably indicating a push to fill jobs before the end of the fiscal year.

The first merit principle requires that competition for jobs be fair and open. About half of the vacancy announcements were open between 2 weeks and a month. In FY 2001 some announcements were posted later than the opening date, which effectively reduced the number of days applicants could apply. At best, this results in less publicity (and possibly fewer and lower-quality applications) than the agency intended. At worst—for an agency with a very short notice period—it can undermine the perception of “fair and open competition.” Indeed, according to the results of an OPM report on the federal government's 1997 placement actions (“Opportunity Lost: Openness in the Employment Process,” April 1999), a significant portion of vacancies were not posted as required, thus compromising the merit prin-

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ciples.

The Board expects to publish a report based on its findings from this study later this year.

Seen Any Inspiring Ads Lately?

Much attention has been given recently to the need to invest in human capital in the federal government. One aspect of this investment is a focused effort to recruit bright, capable individuals for careers in the civil service. But how do agencies compete for such talent, especially if there are great discrepancies between the salaries that can be offered in the public sector versus the private sector?

In the November 2001 issue of *Government Executive*, Paul Light, a noted researcher in the field of public administration, observed that federal agencies that are trying to recruit top quality candidates not only must pay competitively, but also must offer interesting and challenging work. And while some jobs in the federal sector may not fill that bill, there are certainly many that do (or potentially could). However, according to Light, agencies generally do not do a very good job of advertising the intangible rewards of public service such as working in a chosen field or providing a vital public service.

We suspect that “selling the work” (as Light refers to this recruitment strategy) may be one of the most effective approaches to attracting top talent. As we noted in our November 2001 *Issues of Merit*, the Office of Policy and Evaluation is currently conducting a study of federal recruiting. One of the areas we are exploring concerns agency efforts to “sell the work.” If you know of examples of such efforts, we’d appreciate hearing from you. Contact our project managers by email at jamie.carlyle@mspb.gov or karen.gard@mspb.gov to pass on this information.

Tools of the Trade



With this article, we introduce our “Tools of the Trade” feature, an occasional series that will highlight important human resource management concepts, methods, or practices. The series is aimed at readers who may not be familiar with a topic, or would like a quick refresher. The articles will emphasize the basics (what, why, and how), but will also highlight trends or new approaches of interest to the experienced practitioner. Our first articles in this series will cover job analysis, the foundation for federal employment practices. In this issue we discuss what a job analysis is and why we do it. In our next *Issues of Merit* we’ll look at how to do a job analysis and review the new trends in the field.

What is job analysis?

It’s the process of analyzing work to identify its important roles, functions, and tasks, and to describe what it takes to perform the work successfully.

“What it takes” generally centers on knowledges, skills, abilities (KSAs), and competencies, but can include working relationships, training, licensures and certifications, and material resources such as tools and technology. Job analysis usually results in an inventory of tasks and associated competencies or KSAs. Generally, the task inventory will include information on the importance of the individual tasks, and the competencies will be linked to the tasks. This inventory may serve as the basis for the development of follow-on products such as qualifications standards, crediting plans, selection procedures, training plans, and performance standards.

Job analysis is performed by job analysts—people who have detailed knowledge of the job or occupation (often called “subject matter

experts”) and who are familiar with human resources management principles and methods. Job analysis need not be done by a single person; commonly, job analysis is a cooperative venture between line organizations and human resources staff, in which managers or line employees provide the job knowledge and human resources professionals translate that knowledge into appropriate formats and applications.

Why do job analysis?

The inventory of tasks and competencies produced by job analysis provides a sound basis for a wide variety of management functions. For example, job analysis gives us a road map for employee development by highlighting competencies essential to successful performance. Arguably, the most important application of job analysis is staffing. Accordingly, among the most common products of job analysis are:

- Assessment strategies – plans for how the organization will evaluate job candidates;
- Crediting plans – lists of competencies, accompanied by level descriptions, that are used to systematically evaluate candidates’ training and experience; and
- Interview questions.

Job analysis is also fundamental to fairness in the workplace. The merit system principles require federal agencies to select on the basis of relative ability and to train employees to improve individual and organizational performance. Job analysis supports these principles by ensuring that important decisions such as selection and training are based on job-related criteria, rather than unproven (and potentially biased) beliefs and perceptions. For this reason, federal employers base their employment practices on job analysis.

Next time, we’ll outline how a job analysis is done and take a look at what’s new in the field.



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- Restoring Merit to Federal Hiring: Why Two Special Hiring Programs Should Be Ended
- The Role of Delegated Examining Units: Hiring New Employees in a Decentralized Civil Service
- Federal Supervisors and Poor Performers
- Civil Service Evaluation: the Evolving Role of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management
- Federal Supervisors and Strategic Human Resources Management
- The Changing Federal Workplace: Employee Perspectives
- Adherence to the Merit Principles in the Workplace: Federal Employees' Views
- Achieving a Representative Workforce: Addressing the Barriers to Hispanic Participation
- Fair and Equitable Treatment: A Progress Report on Minority Employment in the Federal Government
- The Rule of Three in Federal Hiring: Boon or Bane?
- Sexual Harassment in the Federal Workplace: Trends, Progress, Continuing Challenges
- Leadership for Change: Human Resource Development in the Federal Government
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| <input type="checkbox"/> Merit promotion | <input type="checkbox"/> Competence in overseeing federal contracts |
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| <input type="checkbox"/> The use of interviews | <input type="checkbox"/> Automated candidate assessment |

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