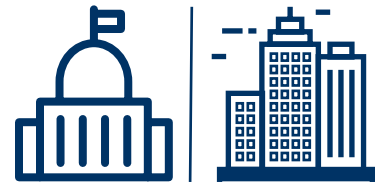




# Comparing Federal and Private Sector Staffing

*Why Capacity, Timeliness, and Risk Look Different*



THE CHAIRMAN



U.S. MERIT SYSTEMS PROTECTION BOARD

1615 M Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20419-0001

September 4, 2026

The Honorable Donald J. Trump  
President of the United States  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

In accordance with the requirements of 5 U.S.C. § 1204(a)(3), I am pleased to submit this U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) publication, *Comparing Federal and Private Sector Staffing: Why Capacity, Timeliness, and Risk Look Different*. We are submitting this publication electronically, and it will be available on the Studies page of our website at [www.mspb.gov/studies](http://www.mspb.gov/studies).

This brief examines how staffing specialists in the Federal Government and private sector perform similar staffing functions while operating under different requirements, expectations, and accountability structures. It provides context for understanding why hiring capacity, timeliness, and risk can look different in Federal staffing than in other recruiting environments.

The publication discusses several issues that are central to strengthening Federal hiring: the relationship between hiring speed and compliance demands; staffing workforce capacity and succession risks; modernization and technology; the partnership between staffing specialists and hiring managers; and retention, workload, and expertise. The brief emphasizes that improvements to Federal hiring must support mission needs while preserving the merit system principles that protect fairness, transparency, and public trust.

MSPB offers this publication to assist policymakers, agency leaders, and human capital professionals as they consider ways to improve Federal hiring, support the staffing workforce, and ensure that agencies can meet current and future workforce needs. I believe you will find this brief useful as you consider issues affecting the Federal workforce.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "J. Woodruff II".

James J. Woodruff II  
Chairman

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Henry J. Kerner".

Henry J. Kerner  
Vice Chairman

Enclosure

## How to Use this Brief

This brief is intended to support oversight, policy development, and management decisions related to federal hiring. It provides background on how federal staffing work differs from private sector recruiting and highlights factors that affect hiring capacity, timeliness, and merit system protections.

Readers may use this brief to:

- Prepare for hearings or briefings on federal hiring and workforce capacity
- Identify questions to ask agencies about staffing, workload, and modernization
- Provide context for interpreting federal HR workforce data and hiring outcomes

## Key Points at a Glance



Federal and private sector staffing specialists perform similar functions under very different constraints



Federal staffing work emphasizes legal accuracy and merit protections over speed and flexibility



Longer tenure of federal HR professionals supports expertise but increases succession and capacity risks



Technology changes staffing work but often increases cognitive demand



Staffing specialist capacity, including staffing levels, experience, and manageable workloads, is closely linked to hiring outcomes and merit system integrity

## Why Compare Federal and Private Sector Staffing Specialists?

*Hiring challenges can delay mission-critical work, increase workload on existing staff, and expose agencies to legal and oversight risk. Staffing specialists play a central role in preventing these outcomes, yet their work is often invisible to decision-makers until problems arise. Understanding how federal staffing work differs from private sector recruiting helps explain why federal hiring can be difficult to accelerate—and why staffing capacity matters for mission performance and merit system protections.*

Federal leaders depend on effective hiring to carry out agency missions and maintain public trust. Behind every hiring action—whether filling a critical vacancy or scaling the workforce to meet new priorities—are staffing specialists who translate workforce needs into fair, lawful, and timely hiring decisions. These issues are especially relevant as agencies face intensifying competition for talent, increasing demand for specialized skills, new hiring directives and policies, and efforts to modernize legacy federal hiring systems, often at the same time.

Staffing specialists exist in both the federal government and the private sector, and they share many of the same core responsibilities. Yet the environments in which they operate differ in important ways. Private sector staffing specialists work in market-driven systems that emphasize speed and flexibility. Federal staffing specialists work in compliance-driven systems that prioritize legal accuracy, transparency, and adherence to merit system principles. These differences shape how staffing work is performed, how it is experienced by employees and managers, and how hiring outcomes are achieved.

This brief draws on academic research and federal data to compare federal and private sector HR staffing specialists across several dimensions, including demographics, work structure, relationships with managers and supervisors, career development, technology, and retention. The goal is not to judge one system against the other, but to provide context for understanding the unique demands placed on federal staffing specialists—and the implications for workforce capacity and performance.

To understand why these differences matter, it helps to think about what staffing specialists actually do. In both sectors, they are the people who turn a manager's need into a hire. They write job announcements, screen applicants, coordinate interviews, and make sure relevant law and regulations are followed through the hiring process. That core mission is the same. What changes dramatically is the rulebook they must follow and the environment they work in.

This distinction matters because it shapes everything: how long hiring takes, what skills specialists need, how they relate to the managers they serve, and how well organizations can hold onto experienced staff. Research on human resources management confirms that when people are expected to meet goals that pull in opposite directions—such as moving fast while also getting every legal detail right—job stress rises and performance can suffer (Shantz et al., 2013). Federal staffing specialists face that tension regularly.

By establishing this comparative baseline, the brief helps decision-makers better understand the role staffing specialists play as enablers of mission delivery. It also sets the stage for deeper analysis of federal staffing specialists' experiences using new evidence from the Federal HR Workforce Survey.

*The findings in this brief provide essential context for understanding the experiences and perspectives of federal staffing specialists examined in the forthcoming HR Workforce Survey research brief.*

## Demographic Profiles

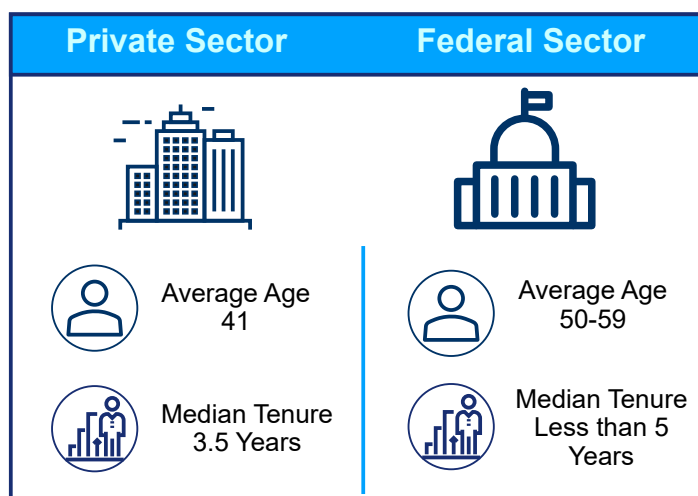
### *Who staffing specialists are, and what that means for hiring capacity*

Research typically treats staffing as part of the broader human resources (HR) and talent acquisition function, focused on attracting, selecting, and integrating new employees. (Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2025) In the United States, most staffing specialists work in the private sector and are classified as “human resources specialists.”

Private sector staffing specialists are generally mid-career, and the workforce is majority female (BLS, 2024, CPS). The median tenure of private sector employees is approximately 3.5 years, reflecting broader patterns of private sector mobility (BLS, 2024). This relatively high turnover is not just a workforce statistic—it shapes how organizations in the private sector invest in onboarding, training, and knowledge management. When experienced recruiters leave, they take client relationships, institutional knowledge, and muscle memory with them.

Federal staffing specialists, by contrast, often bring substantial federal experience to the staffing function. Although many staffing specialists have accumulated significant federal service, a majority have been in the current staffing position for less than five years, suggesting that staffing roles frequently draw employees from other HR specialties (Merit Systems Protection Board [MSPB], 2026). Although many staffing specialists are relatively new to their current staffing role, they often bring substantial federal experience from other HR functions. Many have accumulated 10 or more years of federal service, which strengthens institutional knowledge and organizational continuity (Office of Personnel Management [OPM], 2023, MSPB, 2025). This experience creates deep expertise in complex federal regulations and procedures that can take years to develop and may be difficult to replace. At the same time, concentrations of experienced staff approaching retirement eligibility can create succession planning and knowledge-transfer challenges. Research suggests that while longer tenure supports continuity and expertise, it can also increase workforce planning challenges that are less common in other sectors (Pynes, 2013).

Adding to this challenge, federal HR has historically underinvested in structured knowledge-transfer programs. Studies of public sector workforce planning find that agencies often lack formal mentoring and documentation systems that would allow newer employees to absorb the expertise of departing specialists (Lavigna, 2013). Without these mechanisms, the retirement of even a small number of experienced staffing specialists can have an outsized impact on an agency’s hiring capacity.



**Why this matters:** Experienced staffing specialists provide critical expertise and continuity. As more employees become retirement eligible, agencies may face knowledge transfer and succession planning challenges that could affect hiring capacity and compliance.

*\*Note: Measures shown are based on the best available data sources and are not directly comparable*

# Occupational Overview

## *Similar goals, very different operating environments*

Research shows that staffing specialists are increasingly expected to combine technical HR expertise, interpersonal skills, and business insight (Breaugh, 2013; Chapman & Webster, 2003). Across sectors, staffing is a high-volume decision-making role that requires balancing speed, quality, fairness, and the candidate experience all at the same time (Breaugh, 2013; Chapman et al., 2005).

## *Private Sector: Speed, Flexibility, and Market Responsiveness*

In the private sector, staffing specialists—often called recruiters or talent acquisition specialists—manage hiring from recruitment through onboarding. Their work is shaped by labor market conditions, organizational growth goals, and pressure to fill vacancies quickly and competitively (Breaugh, 2013). This environment allows greater flexibility in setting requirements, negotiating pay, and adjusting selection procedures.

Private sector recruiters are also increasingly expected to act as talent advisors who understand business strategy, not just administrative processors. Research on talent acquisition trends shows that high-performing recruiting teams in the private sector tend to be deeply integrated with business units and treated as strategic partners rather than support functions (Deloitte, 2022). This positioning gives them greater authority to influence hiring standards and speed up decisions.

Technology plays a major role in this flexibility. Private sector organizations have rapidly adopted applicant tracking systems, AI-powered sourcing tools, and automated screening platforms. These tools can dramatically reduce time-to-fill for common roles, but they also raise candidate expectations and create pressure to respond faster at every stage of the hiring process (Parry & Tyson, 2011). Recruiters who cannot keep up risk losing top candidates to faster-moving competitors.

## *Federal Sector: Compliance, Rigor, and the Merit System*

Federal staffing specialists serve a dual mission. In addition to hiring qualified employees, they must ensure compliance with merit system principles, veterans' preference, prohibited personnel practice protections, and detailed statutory and regulatory requirements (MSPB, 2006; OPM, 2024). As a result, federal staffing work places greater emphasis on procedural accuracy, documentation, and legal defensibility.

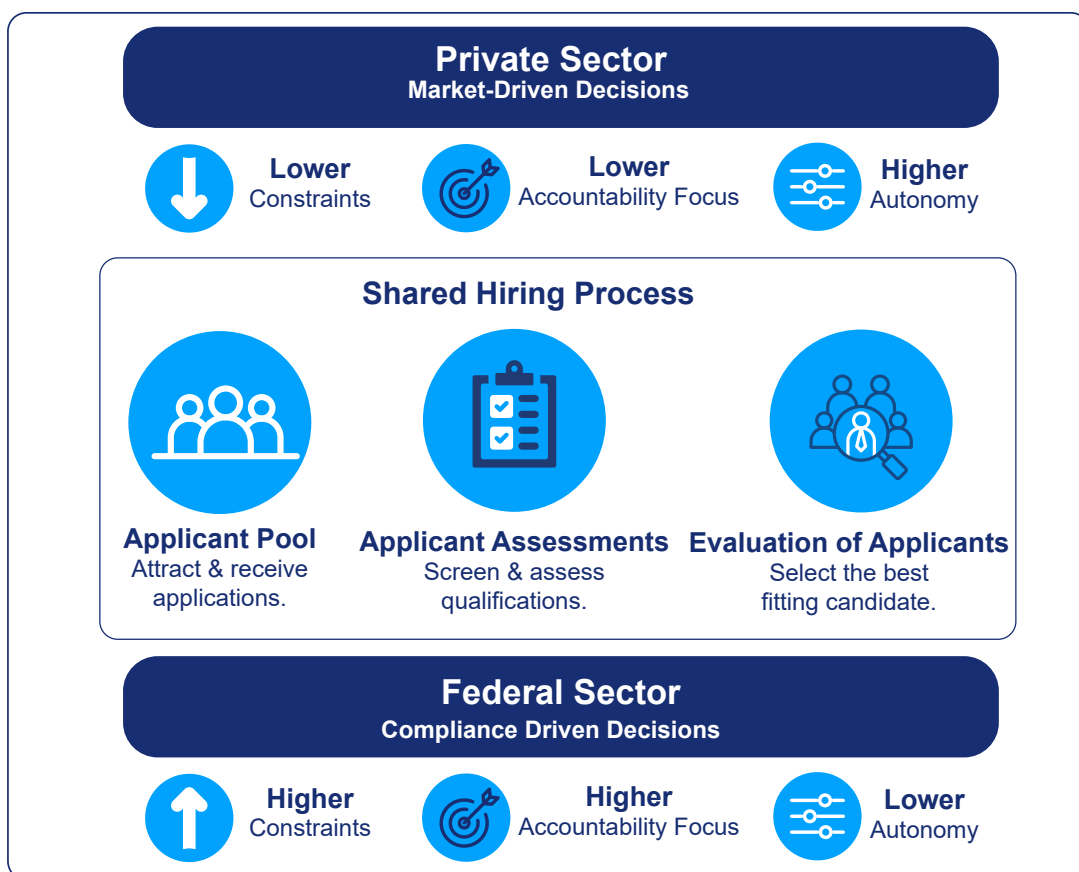
This is not simply a matter of moving slower. It reflects a fundamentally different purpose. The merit system exists to ensure that federal hiring is based on qualifications and fairness—not favoritism, or political influence. Federal staffing specialists are part of the guardrails for that system. Every vacancy announcement they write, every applicant list they certify, and every selection they process must be defensible under law.

This legal accountability creates a work environment that is both more structured and more consequential. A mistake in private sector recruiting might mean a delayed start date or a bad hire that can be corrected. A mistake in federal staffing can expose an agency to formal complaints, legal challenges, and oversight findings. MSPB research has found that federal hiring involves balancing efficiency, quality, and merit-system protections, while HR specialists report operational burdens associated with complex processes and workload demands (MSPB, 2006; MSPB, 2020).

## Comparing the Two Environments

Research consistently shows that staffing work includes both transactional and relational tasks in both sectors—such as job analysis, vacancy announcements, applicant screening, interview coordination, and job offers. The key difference lies in how this work is structured. Private sector recruiters typically operate with more discretion and adaptability, while federal staffing specialists work within highly standardized systems, such as USA Staffing, with strict rules governing assessment and selection (OPM, 2024). Academic literature characterizes federal staffing as process-intensive, while private sector recruiting is more market-responsive (Pynes, 2013; Breaugh, 2013).

These structural differences have real consequences. When agencies face pressure to hire faster—whether in response to a mission surge, a policy directive, or a workforce reduction that left positions vacant—federal staffing specialists cannot simply change the rules. They must navigate existing legal requirements, often under added pressure and with limited staff. Understanding this constraint is essential for setting realistic expectations around hiring timelines and for evaluating whether proposed reforms are achievable without creating new compliance risks.



**Why this matters:** Federal staffing specialists do the same core hiring work as private sector recruiters, but under stricter rules and with less flexibility. These differences affect how quickly agencies can hire and how much effort is required to ensure hiring decisions are fair and legally sound. Recognizing this distinction is key to developing policies that improve speed without undermining merit protections.

## Relationships With Hiring Managers

### *Partnership is essential—and often strained*

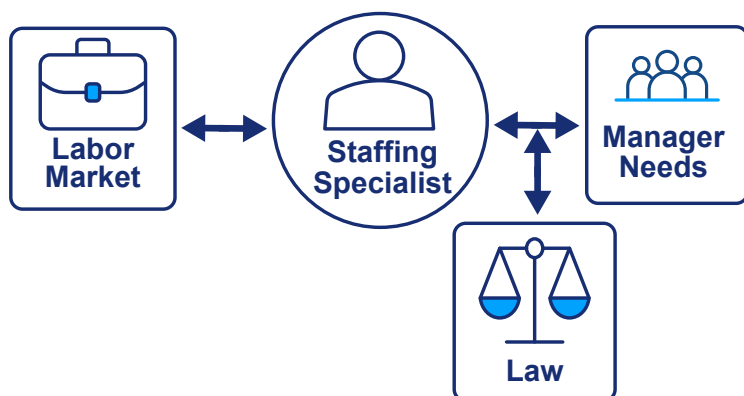
“Staffing specialists in both sectors work closely with hiring managers, making this relationship one of the most studied aspects of staffing effectiveness. When staffing specialist-manager relationships work well, studies consistently link them to higher...” (Kulik & Roberson, 2008).

When staffing specialist-manager relationships work well, studies consistently link them to higher job satisfaction, better hiring outcomes, and stronger retention among new hires (Breaugh & Starke, 2000; Bersin, 2013). When these relationships break down, common challenges between staffing specialists and hiring managers include shifting job requirements, delayed managerial feedback, and disagreements over pay setting, qualification standards, or acceptable time-to-hire.

In the private sector, staffing specialists are frequently described in the research and practitioner literature as “talent advisors” who are expected to manage or “own” candidate pipelines and advise managers on sourcing and market feasibility (Deloitte, 2022; SHRM, 2025). In contrast, federal staffing specialists are more often positioned as procedural experts and compliance partners whose role centers on navigating statutory, regulatory, and system requirements (Pynes, 2013). Hiring managers may perceive federal hiring processes as slower or more restrictive—particularly during periods of urgency—which can strain relationships with HR staff (MSPB, 2006). At the same time, federal managers frequently rely on staffing specialists for technical guidance through complex hiring rules and systems, reinforcing HR’s role as a compliance and process advisor rather than a labor-market intermediary (Pynes, 2013).

Research on HR business partnering in the public sector finds that role clarity is one of the strongest predictors of a productive staffing specialists—manager relationship (Lavigna, 2013). When both parties understand who is responsible for which parts of the hiring process—and when—friction is reduced and decisions move faster. In agencies where these roles are poorly defined, managers often experience frustration and staffing specialists report feeling unsupported.

## Relationship with Hiring Managers



Strong partnerships equal higher quality hires and better retention.

**Why this matters:** Hiring outcomes depend on strong partnerships between staffing specialists and hiring managers. When expectations are misaligned, hiring can slow down and place added strain on both HR staff and managers. Improving role clarity and communication between these two groups is one of the most direct ways to improve hiring outcomes.

# Views of Supervisors and Management

## *How oversight shapes workload and retention*

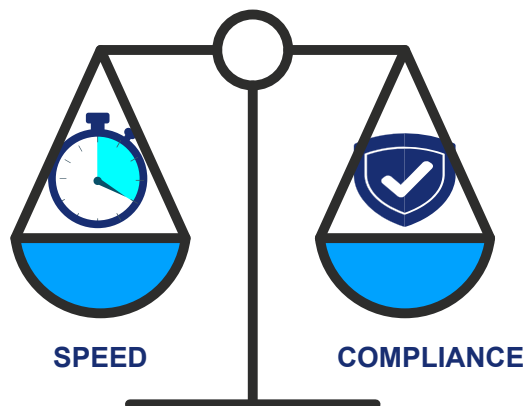
Across both the federal and private sectors, research shows that staffing specialists' views of their supervisors are closely tied to workload management and organizational support. In both sectors, staffing specialists report higher satisfaction when supervisors set realistic hiring (Hausknecht et al., 2009).

In both sectors, staffing specialists report higher satisfaction when supervisors set realistic hiring targets, provide support during hiring surges, and recognize staffing as a strategic function. When supervision focuses narrowly on metrics such as time-to-fill, stress and burnout are more likely (Shantz et al., 2013). While these dynamics appear in both sectors, research suggests their effects are more pronounced in the federal environment, where specialists already carry a heavier compliance burden.

Performance expectations also differ by sector. Private sector staffing performance is often measured by speed, cost-per-hire, and manager satisfaction, which can intensify pressure during tight labor markets (Shantz et al., 2013). Federal staffing specialists are evaluated more heavily on procedural accuracy, auditability, and legal compliance. Research shows that federal specialists often experience pressure from both oversight bodies and customers, creating role strain when speed and compliance expectations conflict (MSPB, 2006, MSPB, 2020).

Studies on public sector human resource management also highlight the role of organizational culture in shaping supervisor behavior. In agencies where HR is valued as a strategic function, supervisors are more likely to provide resources, advocate for workload relief, and shield their teams from unrealistic demands. In agencies where HR is seen primarily as a processing function, supervisors may inadvertently reinforce high-pressure, metric-driven environments that increase turnover risk (Lavigna, 2013).

## Speed vs. Compliance



Pressure increases when speed and compliance goals collide

**Why this matters:** Supervisory expectations shape staffing specialists' workload, stress levels, and willingness to stay. When speed and compliance goals conflict, staffing specialists face higher risk of burnout and errors. Supervisors who treat staffing as a strategic function—not just a processing one—are better positioned to retain skilled staff and improve hiring outcomes.

## Impact of HR Modernization and Technology

### *Technology could modernize the HR system – but not always the workload*

Technology has reshaped staffing work in both sectors. Research shows that automation reduces clerical tasks but increases cognitive demands by shifting work toward information processing, judgment, and relationship management (Parry & Tyson, 2011). In other words, when technology handles the routine, humans are left with the complex, and complex work takes more mental energy, not less.

Consistent with these findings, MSPB research on federal HR technology shows that while modern hiring systems can improve consistency and transparency, they may also increase workload and frustration when systems are complex, inflexible, or poorly aligned with how staffing specialists actually perform their work (MSPB, 2025).

Private sector staffing specialists commonly rely on applicant tracking systems and AI-enabled sourcing tools. While these systems improve organization and tracking, they also raise expectations for constant availability and faster hiring cycles (Dery et al., 2013; Parry & Tyson, 2011). Research suggests that when organizations introduce new technology without adequate training or workflow redesign, adoption is slow and frustration is high. These outcomes are particularly common in large organizations with complex legacy processes (Dery et al., 2013).

Federal staffing relies on centralized systems and uniform rules intended to promote consistency and compliance across agencies. Although modernization efforts have improved transparency, research finds that rigid system requirements—whether embedded in technology or in standardized hiring procedures—can limit staffing specialists' discretion and increase frustration among both HR staff and hiring managers (MSPB, 2006; OPM, 2024). When specialists encounter situations where formal system rules or processes do not align with the practical demands of a specific hiring action, they may develop informal workarounds to complete the work. While these adaptations are often intended to keep hiring moving, they can introduce new compliance risks rather than reduce them.

## Impact of HR Modernization

### 1 Technology changes the work.

Automation reduces clerical tasks and increases judgment and coordination.



Less Clerical Work



More Judgment  
& Coordination

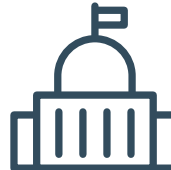
### 2 Different tools. Different trade-offs.

Private Sector  
Flexible Tools



Improve tracking & speed  
but raise expectations for  
constant availability.

Federal Sector  
Standardized Platforms



Ensure consistency & compliance  
but reduce discretion and can  
increase frustration.



Modern systems improve transparency and consistency, but if complex, inflexible, or poorly aligned, they add work and slow hiring.

**Why this matters:** New technology systems change how staffing work is done but do not automatically reduce workload. Without sufficient training and support, modernization can increase frustration and slow hiring. The most effective technology implementations pair new systems with workflow redesign, ongoing training, and mechanisms for specialists to provide feedback.

## Career Progression and Development

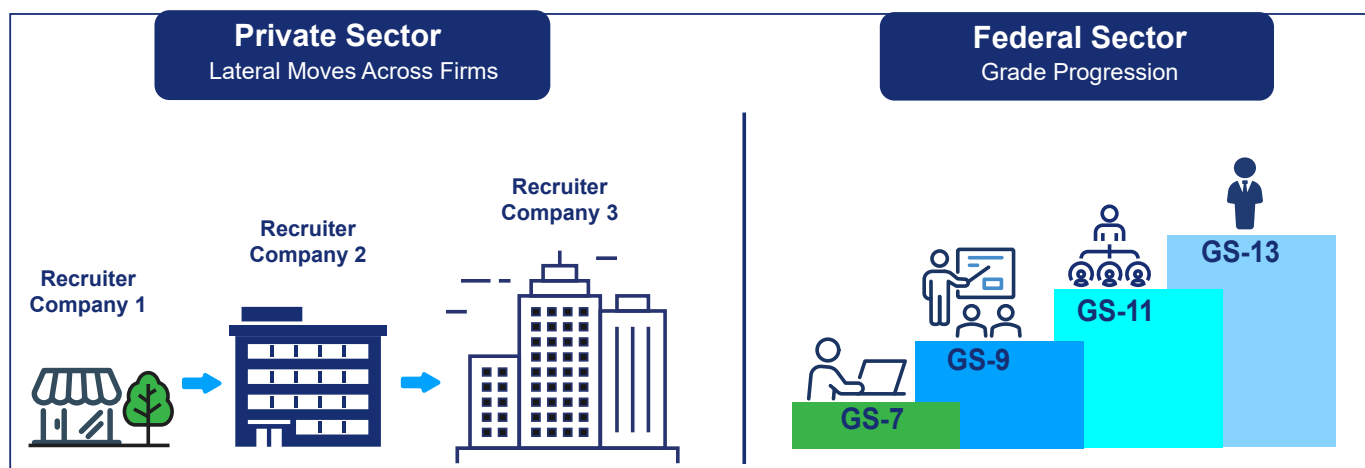
### *Different paths, shared skill demands*

Research indicates that staffing specialists in both sectors typically follow structured career paths, such as progression from recruiter to senior recruiter or movement into broader HR roles (Breagh, 2013). Advancement depends less on tenure and more on skill development, particularly in analytics, labor market knowledge, and stakeholder communication.

In the private sector, career progression often involves changing employers or industries. In the federal sector, career paths are more structured, with clear grade ladders and advancement tied to time-in-grade and merit promotion rules. Federal HR specialists report fewer exits from the occupation but greater specialization within the HR series (Pynes, 2013).

One area where both sectors are converging is the growing importance of data literacy. Staffing specialists at all levels are increasingly expected to use workforce analytics to inform hiring decisions, track pipeline metrics, and report on hiring outcomes to leadership. Research on emerging HR competencies finds that professionals who combine legal or procedural expertise with analytical skills are better positioned for advancement and are more effective in their roles (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2007). For federal staffing specialists, this means that professional development programs must go beyond knowledge of regulations to build skills in data interpretation and evidence-based decision-making.

Research also finds that limited development opportunities are a significant driver of voluntary turnover among mid-career HR professionals. Forty-one percent of HR professionals said they had considered leaving the HR field within the previous year (Lattice, 2026). In the federal sector, where compensation is often less competitive than the private sector for certain skill levels, career development and meaningful work are among the most important non-monetary factors that influence retention.



**Why this matters:** Clear career paths support retention and skill development, but rigid structures can limit flexibility. How agencies develop and advance staffing specialists—especially in areas like data analytics and legal interpretation—directly affects long-term hiring capacity and the ability to retain skilled professionals in a competitive labor market.

## Common Job Challenges and Retention

### *Pressure points that shape workforce stability*

Across studies, staffing specialists report high workload, competing demands, and emotional strain associated with high-volume hiring and stakeholder coordination. Private sector recruiters often experience workload spikes during tight labor markets, while federal staffing specialists report greater role complexity due to rules, documentation, and oversight requirements (Shantz et al., 2013; MSPB, 2025).

Retention reflects how well organizations manage these pressures. Industry surveys suggest that private sector recruiter turnover is moderate to high and is associated with limited development opportunities, compensation and rewards, workload-related stress, and organizational support (Lewis, 2022; Lattice, 2026; Ciphir, 2026).

One factor that is often underappreciated in federal HR workforce discussions is the role of professional identity. Research on public-sector HR professionals finds that those who see their work as meaningful—as contributing to public service and protecting fair hiring—are more likely to stay

even when conditions are challenging (Lavigna, 2013). When modernization or reorganization efforts strip away the discretionary elements of their work, specialists may feel that the meaning of their role has been diminished, which can accelerate disengagement even without a change in pay or formal responsibilities.

Burnout is also an increasing concern. Studies across public administration and HR literature confirm that role overload, being asked to handle more work than is realistically manageable, is a primary driver of burnout, reduced accuracy, and ultimately, turnover (Shantz et al., 2013). In the context of federal staffing, where a single error can trigger a formal complaint or adverse action, the stakes of burnout extend beyond individual well-being to institutional risk.

## Retention Risk by Key Workforce Factor

| Factor                 | Low Risk                                              | Moderate Risk                                   | High Risk                                              |
|------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Workload</b>        | Sustainable workload; quality and accuracy maintained | Manageable pressure; requires active monitoring | Elevated stress; accuracy declines; high turnover risk |
| <b>Work Complexity</b> | Straightforward tasks; lower cognitive strain         | Balanced challenge; generally manageable        | Overly complex; high turnover risk                     |
| <b>Autonomy</b>        | High autonomy; greater engagement and commitment      | Some discretion; mixed impact on engagement     | Limited control; high frustration and disengagement    |

**Note:** This table is an illustrative summary intended to show how workload, work complexity, and autonomy may contribute to different retention-risk levels. The categories are not validated thresholds. Readers should refer to the supporting discussion and cited sources in the text and reference section for additional context.

**Why this matters:** High workload, role complexity, and limited autonomy increase stress and affect retention. Sustaining the federal staffing workforce is essential to maintaining timely hiring and protecting merit-based decisions. Treating retention risk as an early warning indicator—alongside traditional metrics like time-to-fill—provides a more complete picture of hiring system health.

## Oversight and Policy Implications

### ***Federal staffing specialists are a critical control point in the merit system.***

Oversight and policy choices that affect their capacity, tools, and expectations directly shape agencies' ability to hire effectively, lawfully, and in a timely manner. Overall, research shows that private sector staffing specialists operate in speed-driven, market-oriented environments, while federal staffing specialists work in compliance-driven, process-intensive systems. Both roles require similar core skills, but federal staffing places greater emphasis on legal knowledge and procedural rigor, while private sector recruiting emphasizes adaptability and labor market responsiveness. This comparison helps explain why accelerating federal hiring is not solely a matter of increasing speed, but also of managing complexity and risk.

Below we share key insights tailored to policy-makers, agency leadership, and HR management. These are specific and actionable steps agencies can take to support federal staffing specialists.

## Workforce Capacity and Succession Planning

- **Monitor staffing specialist capacity as a mission risk.**
  - Use oversight to ask agencies how many staffing specialists are eligible to retire in the next 5–10 years and whether succession plans are in place.
- **Encourage proactive workforce planning for HR roles.**
  - Agencies with aging staffing workforces may need targeted hiring, mentoring, and knowledge-transfer strategies to avoid future hiring slowdowns.

## Hiring Speed, Compliance, and Performance Expectations

- **Balance expectations for speed with compliance realities.**
  - Oversight bodies should recognize that federal staffing specialists are accountable for legal accuracy and documentation, not just time-to-hire.
- **Review how hiring performance metrics are used.**
  - Emphasis on speed alone can increase errors, rework, and stress. Balanced metrics can support both timely hiring and merit protections.

## Hiring Manager–HR Partnerships

- **Promote shared accountability between hiring managers and HR.**
  - Policy guidance and agency leadership messaging can clarify that hiring outcomes depend on collaboration—not just HR execution.
- **Use oversight to identify recurring friction points.**
  - Hearings, briefings, or surveys can identify where unclear requirements, delayed feedback, or unrealistic expectations slow hiring.

## Supervision, Workload, and Retention

- **Assess whether staffing workloads are sustainable.**
  - Oversight can focus on whether staffing specialists are managing volumes that allow for quality, accuracy, and reasonable work hours.
- **Encourage supervisory practices that support retention.**
  - Evidence shows that realistic goals, surge support, and recognition reduce burnout and improve retention—even without new pay authorities.

## HR Modernization and Technology

- **Evaluate modernization impacts on frontline HR work.**
  - Oversight should ask not only whether systems improve compliance, but also how they affect flexibility, workload, and user experience.
- **Align modernization goals with staffing capacity.**
  - New systems may increase cognitive demands and training needs, especially during transitions.

## Career Development and Skills

- **Support skill development in complex hiring environments.**
  - Policy choices can encourage training in legal interpretation, data analysis, and stakeholder communication—skills linked to better hiring outcomes.
- **Examine whether career ladders align with mission needs.**
  - Structured progression supports retention but may limit flexibility if not paired with development opportunities.

## Retention and Engagement Risks

- **Treat staffing specialist turnover as an early warning indicator.**
  - Rising stress or disengagement among staffing specialists can signal future hiring delays and compliance risks.
- **Focus on workload, flexibility, growth opportunities, and support—not just compensation.**
  - Research shows these factors are strong predictors of retention in both federal and private sectors.

## Setting the Stage for Deeper Insight

Taken together, the research shows that federal and private sector staffing specialists perform similar core functions but under very different conditions. Federal staffing specialists operate in a process-intensive, compliance-driven environment that requires high levels of legal knowledge, documentation, and judgment. These demands support merit-based hiring, but they also increase role complexity and place sustained pressure on staffing capacity.

Understanding these structural differences is essential for interpreting workforce outcomes in the federal HR community. Differences in tenure, discretion, performance expectations, and technology use help explain why federal staffing specialists experience hiring work differently than their private sector counterparts—and why traditional measures of speed or efficiency alone may not capture the full picture of federal hiring performance.

This brief provides context. An upcoming companion research brief, based on findings from the Federal HR Workforce Survey, builds on this foundation by examining who federal staffing specialists are, how they experience their work, and what challenges they report in today's federal hiring environment. Together, these products are intended to inform oversight, policy, and management decisions that affect the capacity of the federal staffing function and the integrity of merit-based hiring.

As agencies continue to navigate hiring surges, evolving requirements, and modernization efforts, understanding the structure and demands of federal staffing work becomes increasingly important. The companion research brief, based on findings from the Federal HR Workforce Survey, builds on this context by examining how federal staffing specialists experience these challenges and protect the merit system in practice.

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