What Characteristic Competencies Tell Us About Agency Culture

Employees' views about which competencies are most valued in the organization provide useful insights for agency leaders.

Having the right skills and abilities to do their jobs is critical to the success of Federal employees. Not only do these competencies drive job performance, but they may also influence workplace culture and values. When many agency jobs require analytical ability, for example, that agency will hire for and develop this competency in its workforce. The evidence of this emphasis may be reflected in employees' interest in solving problems, exploring new technology, using data and evidence to make decisions, and other activities that appeal to those with analytical skills. Thus, analytical skills will have become part of the agency's culture as well as a job-related competency.

The Merit Systems Protection Board's (MSPB) 2011 report *Making the Right Connections: Targeting the Best Competencies for Training* examined how job-related competencies are acquired by agencies through employee selection, training, and development. In the most recent Merit Principles Survey (MPS) in 2021, we extended this research by asking respondents across Federal organizations which skill or ability their agency allows them to use best on the job—an indication of which competencies seem most valued in their workplace. Responses to this open-ended question were classified into eight competency categories. These categories are based on a multi-occupation analysis designed to identify a core set of general competencies which enable an employee to do related tasks. They include leading and deciding (leadership), supporting and cooperating (cooperation), interacting and presenting (influence), analyzing and interpreting (analysis), creating and conceptualizing (creativity), organizing and executing (organization), adapting and coping (adaptability), and enterprising and performing (ambition).[1]

The chart on the next page summarizes the results of this analysis. The dark blue bars in the chart indicate the percentage of respondents describing a best-used skill or ability in each competency category. The competencies most often identified were cooperation (28 percent), analysis (24 percent), and organization (23 percent). The other five competencies were less often identified. Because respondents were asked to identify a single skill or ability, the competency percentages total 100 percent.

[1] Bartram, D. (2005). The great eight competencies: A criterion-centric approach to validation. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 90(6), 1185-1203.

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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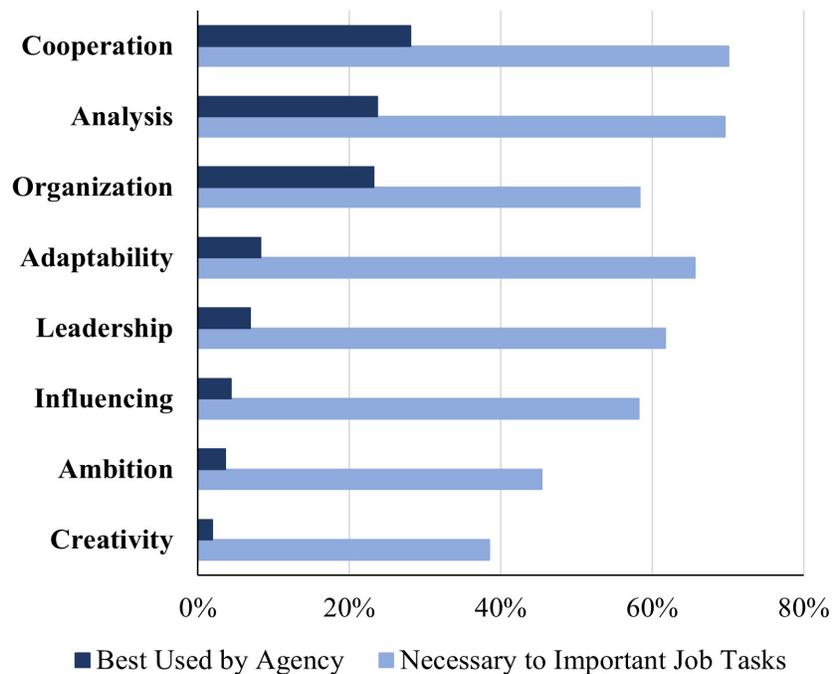
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Relative Importance of Competencies in Federal Work (2016 and 2021)

The light blue bars present data from an earlier MPS in 2016. They show the percentage of respondents who reported using each competency to a *great extent* in their most important job tasks. The 2016 data supports the relative importance of cooperation, analysis, and organization to a large portion of Federal work and suggests that adaptability and leadership may also be important. Because respondents rated the importance of each competency individually, the percentages across all eight competencies do *not* total 100 percent and are not directly comparable across the two surveys. However, the competency rankings are very similar in these two data sources.

Across both surveys, our data suggest that cooperation, analysis, and organization are the competencies most characteristic of the Federal workforce. Given the relationship between competencies and workplace culture, and the role of both in attracting applicants, this information could be used to inform recruitment practices. Agencies and applicants might both be well served by realistic job preview statements in job announcements that showcase these competencies relative to others.

Another way to use this information is for agencies to compare their results to the competencies critical to the mission. For instance, if adaptability is needed to do the work, but employees do not think it is an important competency, then the agency should determine if a gap exists and how to fill it. Agencies can also compare their results to the organizational culture they are trying to achieve. If an agency wants to build a culture of creativity and innovation, for example, but its employees perceive these competencies are not valued in the workplace, then the agency should evaluate how to change course and integrate those values into the organization.

Agencies might also consider this approach as they conduct their own job analyses. Asking about most valued abilities might reveal patterns that can help agencies identify their own characteristic competencies. Findings can assist each agency as they compete with the private sector—and with each other—for workforce talent. ❖

Looking Back at a Career in Federal HR

Departing Office of Policy and Evaluation Deputy Director, and Acting Director for the past 2 years, James Tsugawa offers his perspective from 33 years of Government service.

After 33 years working in the Federal Government and 20 years with MSPB, I am retiring from Federal service. As this is my final contribution to the *Issues of Merit* newsletter, I wanted to share some of my thoughts on a few things that have changed in Federal human resources (HR) and some that haven't.

First, things that have changed for the better. The Federal Government has become more flexible and sensible on how work gets done. Telework has become much more widespread and accepted. Quality of work and quality of service are (mostly) valued over face time and clocking in and clocking out. Federal agencies and Federal employees are (mostly) more attentive to how people perform than how they look or how they conduct their lives outside of work. Of course, there is still unfinished work on both these fronts. "Work anywhere, anytime" is not compatible with title 5 of the United States Code as it exists and inclusion is still more a promise than a reality for too many people. But still, the progress is real.

Second, good things that haven't changed. One is the competence and dedication of Federal employees. When the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) hired me as an HR intern in 1988, I was fairly sure that stereotypes about Federal employees were more myth than fact. "Fairly" became "completely" after observing the competence and seriousness of the HUD staff. I remained impressed through my time at the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and remain so today. Another is the value placed on fairness. With few exceptions, the managers and HR staff I worked with cared deeply about treating applicants and employees fairly and basing personnel decisions on a person's skills and accomplishments.

Finally, two things that have changed less than I expected, or hoped. One is how we hire and pay employees. Recently, I skimmed some reports from the 1980s on the state of Federal HR. All presented credible arguments that core systems and practices were dated, dysfunctional, and in need of a major overhaul. That overhaul never happened. In retrospect, the claims feel somewhat…overstated. The General Schedule is still the General Schedule, and the Federal Government still manages to recruit and retain capable and dedicated people. But that seems more a matter of good luck and great effort than good design—and the continued proliferation of direct-hire authorities and special salary rates suggests that our good luck may be running out.

Another is the lack of HR training and decision support for Federal supervisors and managers. That lapse made little sense in 1988, even if one could hope that state-of-the-art OPM-developed examinations would always deliver highly qualified candidates to every selecting official and then rely on the "rule of three" to ensure that managers would make offers to only the best-qualified. It makes no sense in an age of "flexibility" and "hiring manager involvement." But I fear that too many managers receive little help, human or automated, in the hard work of making merit-based decisions. To take staffing as an example, what assistance is available to develop interview questions, conduct interviews, score responses, check references, and arrive at a decision? My unease doesn't end with staffing. Crafting roles and positions, developing performance standards and measures, and identifying and addressing training needs should not be a DIY project. There is a difference between delegation and desertion. Here, though, improvement doesn't require a rewrite of title 5 *if* policymakers and agency leaders take the business of HR seriously and make the necessary investments.

In closing, I thank my colleagues at MSPB, and the staff of the Office of Policy and Evaluation in particular, for their professionalism, guidance, and support over the years. The work has been interesting and (I hope) worthwhile to our stakeholders, but I will remember the people long after the projects and publications have faded from memory. ❖

Former Acting Director and Deputy Director, Policy and Evaluation
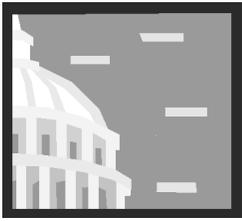
Agency Corner:
The Stay Interview in Practice at the San Francisco Human Services Agency

A Question & Answer with a public sector scientist-practitioner about the use of stay interviews.

Stay interviews are one-on-one discussions between a manager or HR professional and an employee to identify the reasons the employee stays with the organization and what might cause them to leave. MSPB's February 2013 *Issues of Merit* discussed the business case and some guidance for conducting stay interviews. With all the discussion of the "Great Resignation," an economic trend that began mid-pandemic in which employees started resigning from jobs in large numbers, we thought it timely to further explore stay interview practices to help organizations retain employees. Specifically, we spoke with Dr. Felix Caraballo, Ph.D., about his agency's use of stay interviews. Dr. Caraballo is a senior organizational development analyst at the San Francisco Human Services Agency. He co-led applied stay interview research as part of a project to retain vital employees in the city government. The research methodology, findings, and recommendations were published in the report *Human Services Agency: The Stay Interview Report (2020)*.

Q. How were your interviews structured?

A. We utilized a semi-structured interview format that allows for flexibility by having preselected follow-up questions, which lead to more comprehensive and detailed answers while still allowing the interview to follow a standardized format. This ensures a more objective and systematic analysis compared to an open-ended interview, which is highly subjective. Each interview was approximately 30–40 minutes. Employees were asked 14 questions related to engagement, racial equity, leadership, organizational/work culture, promotional pathways, and recruitment. We analyzed the interview data for common themes.

Q. The literature discusses two broad types of stay interviews: (1) those that focus on gathering retention-obstructing information from all employees as an organizational diagnostic tool, and (2) gathering information from top performers to specifically focus on their retention. What was the focus of your stay interviews?

A. Our research was focused on the former and gathered information across employee performance levels rather than focusing on high performing, at-risk people.

Q. What concerns would you have about doing top-performer type stay interviews?

A. I would advise some caution with these types of interviews because employees not invited to be interviewed may be left wondering if they are not as valued. The interviewer is left either asking interviewees for strict confidentiality or accepting the risks to workplace morale.

Q. How might the data obtained from general diagnostic stay interviews be used by the organization?

A. Stay interviews can be used to inform content for follow-up survey research by identifying issues that may need further elaboration using structured survey questions. We have used the results of our stay interviews to inform the following: (1) recruitment and training as a means to market and brand ourselves, (2) workplace improvement/efficiency initiatives, (3) building bench strengths, (4) succession planning, and (5) leadership development efforts.

Q. Do you think that stay interviewers get different answers from high- versus low-performing interviewees?

A. My observation is that higher performers tend to say more positive things about the organization, highlighting the need to gather information across performance levels.

Q. Did you think that stay interviewees may censor their responses when being interviewed by members of the management team?

A. This concern may be warranted but partially overcome by using contractors, interns, or trained non-supervisory employees to conduct the stay interviews.

Q. Might stay interviews plant the idea of exiting in the minds of the employee?

A. Sometimes organizations must take this risk. People will leave whether you talk about it or not. We found it helpful to discuss the challenging aspects of the workplace in the middle of the interview so that people don't leave the interview with these negatives in their mind.

Q. Are stay interviews just another organizational diagnostic tool or is there some benefit to the interviewees?

A. Both—the interviewees benefit because they are given a listening ear. That is, an opportunity to emote and talk about what is concerning them. Many of our interviewees have said they felt more valued and were pleased the organization is gathering their input. Others expressed that they felt this opportunity was a direct line to management.

Q. What were your biggest obstacles to implementing the stay interview?

A. Probably the time commitment required from employees. With almost an hour devoted to each interview, some of our busy employees found this difficult. Another challenge was establishing trust with interviewees to get them to open up. Using non-supervisory interviewers and ensuring confidentiality would be helpful in this regard.

Q. What advice would you offer others seeking to implement stay interviews in their organization?

A. Like any organizational initiative, leadership buy-in is key since the information obtained from stay interviews must be valued by leadership who then solicits and invites the participation. It is also important to include front-line, non-supervisory employees to give them a voice, making the results more balanced. ❖

MSPB Has Regained a Quorum After 5 Years

MSPB welcomes our two new Board members, sworn in on March 4, 2022. MSPB had lacked a Board quorum since January 8, 2017 and had no appointed Board members since March 1, 2019. That meant MSPB had not been able to take certain official actions, including issuing final decisions on petitions for review and publishing full merit system studies. During the lack of quorum, MSPB continued to hear initial appeals and produce research briefs and newsletters. Now that the quorum has been restored, we are excited to work with the new Board members to fully carry out our missions.

Raymond Limon was appointed to serve as MSPB Vice Chair. He will also serve as MSPB's Acting Chair while that position remains vacant. Prior to his MSPB appointment, Mr. Limon was the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Human Capital and Diversity and Chief Human Capital Officer (CHCO) at the Department of Interior, Director of the Office of Civil Service Human Resources Management at the State Department, CHCO at the Corporation for National and Community Service, attorney in OPM's Office of General Counsel specializing in employment litigation and policy review, and the Director of OPM's Office of Administrative Law Judges.

Tristan Leavitt was appointed to serve as Board Member. Prior to his appointment, Mr. Leavitt was the MSPB General Counsel and led the agency as the Acting Chief Executive and Administrative Officer during the absence of Senate-confirmed Board members. Before coming to MSPB, he served as Principal Deputy Special Counsel at the Office of Special Counsel and worked for 8 years on Capitol Hill conducting congressional investigations and handling various Federal workforce policy issues. His time included service on the staff of the Senate Committee on the Judiciary and the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform.

Preventing Perceptions of Favoritism: Consider Using Subject Matter Experts

SMEs can help improve perceptions of a fairer hiring process.

Across multiple surveys spanning more than a decade, Federal employees have consistently told us that one of the prohibited personnel practices (PPPs) they have observed the most is an agency official trying to define the scope or manner of a recruitment action, or the qualifications required, for the purpose of improving the chances of a particular person. A survey cannot tell us whether manipulation of hiring actions led to these perceptions or if the respondents formed erroneous conclusions, but neither is good for the Federal workforce. Fortunately, there are steps that agencies can take to prevent this PPP, as well as perceptions of it occurring. One of these measures is the use of subject matter expert (SME) advisors. Specifically, there are three main opportunities for SMEs to play a role in recruitment actions.

Designing the recruitment plan. Those who already do the job may best understand the day-to-day work, the knowledge and skills that might enable people to perform that work, and where qualified applicants are located. Therefore, they can provide invaluable insights for the job announcement and recruitment sources. Such experts may also be able to advise the agency against anything that creates an appearance of favoritism, such as an unnecessary requirement that narrows the applicant pool too much or an area of consideration that unreasonably shuts out a suitable segment of the workforce.

Developing the assessment plan. Prior to any applications being reviewed, the agency should know how those applications will be assessed. What skills or credentials are desirable versus mandatory? How will the agency prioritize its assessment criteria? What assessments will best evaluate priority skills, and how will they be developed? What questions will be asked in a structured interview, and what benchmarks will be used to assess the answers? SMEs can help create a lot of this. Also, by using SMEs, the agency will have greater credibility that the qualifications are based on the job and not used merely because they coincide with the background of a friend of the selecting official or higher-level manager.

Applying the assessments. For decades, MSPB has recommended the use of a multiple-hurdle approach for assessing candidates. The agency begins with the less labor-intensive assessments (such as scoring resumes) and whittles down the size of the applicant pool before proceeding to the more time-consuming stages, such as structured interviews. By using SMEs to conduct these assessments and advancing only the very best candidates to the final step, the agency ensures that a selecting official cannot choose a substantially less-qualified candidate because that person will never be referred to the official.

It is important to ensure that SMEs are able to meet what could be a considerable time commitment. Also, agencies will have to ensure that SMEs are fully trained in and capable of carrying out whatever hiring duty they are performing. Finally, to be truly successful, agencies should ensure that they have a diverse set of SMEs with balanced perspectives regarding the job duties and needs.

There are additional benefits to using SME panels beyond reducing PPPs. For example, when candidates are interviewed by a diverse group of their future peers, the agency may get better recommendations than any one person could give, and the candidates can get a better sense of the workplace. Additionally, the person selected may have greater credibility upon arrival and have peers who are now invested in their success because those peers put their own reputations on the line by recommending the candidate after the assessment process. Another benefit is that the selectee may be more eager to accept an offer from a workplace that shows it values its employees' expertise by involving the SMEs in the hiring process. OPM encourages the use of SMEs in the hiring process and a pilot program from the U.S. Digital Service found that it led to agencies being more able to identify a diverse pool of applicants they wanted to hire.[1] Preventing PPPs is an important benefit of using SMEs, but it is not the only one. ❖

[1] For more on the U.S. Digital Service pilot, visit https://www.usds.gov/projects/smeqa. For more on OPM's policy regarding the use of SMEs, see "Improving Federal Hiring through the Use of Effective Assessment Strategies to Advance Mission Outcomes" available at https://chcoc.gov/content/improving-federal-hiring-through-use-effective-assessment-strategies-advance-mission.

Keeping Up With the Applicants: Considering the Use of Recruitment Apps

A look at how apps can help recruit a new generation of applicants.

It is well established that the Federal Government has a problem hiring younger employees, particularly students and recent graduates. That is why OPM has established new hiring authorities for these applicants and is encouraging agencies to improve recruitment and assessment practices. In addition, it is clear that to reach and attract highly sought applicants, agencies can no longer rely exclusively on USAJOBS or job fairs. The new generation was raised on technology and expects their potential employers to meet them where they live—their smartphones and social media.

In our May 2020 *Issues of Merit* Agency Corner, we discussed how the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) is using electronic outreach to expand its digital recruiting presence by developing a new career site and establishing a robust presence on social media sites. There are additional tools that can also help agencies reach the new generation of applicants: apps.

What they are: Apps are software applications or computer programs designed to work on handheld devices such as smartphones and tablets making them the best option for a generation raised on technology. Recruitment apps provide quick, concentrated, on-the-go access and information for recruits and recruiters and are very similar to social media apps. On these apps, job seekers can list their skills, education, class projects, career interests, and a resume while organizations can list jobs available, benefits, and skill sets they are seeking. This gives job seekers and organizations a shared space to connect and engage, beyond typical social media sites.

How they work: There is no shortage of apps available for both applicant recruitment and screening, but each one offers something a little different. Some apps use artificial intelligence (AI) to match job seekers and employers or gaming technology to evaluate users' skills. Others are geared towards students and recent graduates, specific job fields like engineering, gig economy jobs, and micro-internships. Some specifically help recruiters find and hire students and recent grads from diverse backgrounds. There are also a couple of recruitment apps that mimic popular dating apps by allowing recruits to swipe left or right on a position or organization based on their interests.

Benefits: The major benefits to using apps are how fast, easy, and convenient they are to match applicants to employers and potentially for applicants to apply and be screened. In addition, today's generation wants to work in a technology-rich environment, not one where technology is an afterthought. Using today's digital technology in the recruitment and hiring process demonstrates a firmer commitment to that. Finally, the judicious use of AI to match and screen applicants could help reduce the number of applicants who are not qualified.

Drawbacks: While apps can make it easier for applicants and employers to connect through today's technology, it will take a sufficient resource commitment by the agency to set up, maintain, and implement the app's activities in line with Federal hiring regulations. Do the apps allow for fair and open competition? Can the apps be combined with other recruitment tools to reach all segments of society? Do the screening tools make valid distinctions among applicants? How can agencies measure the effectiveness of these tools? Furthermore, an easy, convenient process will likely draw a larger number of applicants which can create more work for HR specialists and hiring managers.

It will take much thought and intention to successfully integrate apps into an agency's recruitment process, and even more to use them for screening applicants. Therefore, apps are not a magic wand that will solve all the problems of the Federal hiring system. However, advanced technology is changing the hiring process. An effective app dedicated to recruiting students and recent graduates may improve their knowledge of, interest in, and ability to apply for Federal employment. ❖