Improving Federal Job Announcements

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Recruitment should be from qualified individuals from appropriate sources in an endeavor to achieve a work force from all segments of society, and selection and advancement should be determined solely on the basis of relative ability, knowledge and skills, after fair and open competition which assures that all receive equal opportunity. – Merit System Principle 1 (5 USC § 2301)

Policy Matter: The White House recently released Executive Order 14170, *Reforming the Federal Hiring Process and Restoring Merit to Government Service*, which calls for multiple changes to the federal hiring process.

Merit Matter: Job Opportunity Announcements (JOAs) are the gateway to building a strong federal workforce. As the cornerstone of the hiring process, JOAs must be grounded in merit to attract top-tier, motivated talent. To improve both the efficiency and impact of federal hiring, agencies must rethink how they craft and use JOAs. Below, we outline merit-based strategies to modernize JOAs and strengthen the federal talent pipeline.

A compelling JOA can be a game-changer. As the federal hiring process's front door, JOAs are more than just job listings—they're strategic tools that market an agency and its mission to attract top talent. When thoughtfully crafted, JOAs do more than outline job duties; they showcase your agency's commitment to merit, excellence, and opportunity. For Hiring Managers and Human Resources (HR) Specialists tasked with filling high-priority roles, a strong JOA is essential to attracting the right candidates—highly qualified, motivated, and ready to make an impact.

Even in times of restructuring, some roles remain mission-critical—and the need to fill them efficiently and effectively has never been more urgent. While many agencies have seen reductions in the size of their workforce, others are surging recruitment efforts to meet growing demands. Yet, long before recent changes, federal agencies have struggled to fill high-priority vacancies. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) has flagged[1] government's ability to serve the public.[2] Without the right people in the right roles, agencies simply cannot deliver on their mission.

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[1] U.S. Government Accountability Office (2023.) Strategic Human Capital Management. (GAO-23-106203)

[2] U.S. Government Accountability Office (2025). *Priority open recommendations: Office of personnel management.* GAO-25-108081

While some hiring challenges are beyond an agency's control, many are not—and that's where real opportunity exists. Too often, agencies unintentionally undermine their own hiring efforts with job announcements that miss the mark. In this brief, we share research-backed insights into common pitfalls that prevent JOAs from attracting top talent—and offer practical, proven strategies to improve them. By strengthening JOAs from the start, Hiring Managers and HR Specialists can streamline the entire hiring and onboarding process. When the right candidates apply, selecting and training new hires becomes faster, easier, and more effective.

Common Pitfalls

In a comprehensive customer needs assessment, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) identified multiple roadblocks for applicants, hiring managers, and HR specialists. A key insight from this assessment was that "most job announcements are not written and reviewed with a job seeker in mind. Instead, the announcement is more focused on regulations, which impedes the ability for the government to attract qualified candidates."[3]

Applicants face real challenges when navigating federal job announcements—and those challenges ripple through the entire hiring process. According to OPM, many JOAs are hard to understand due to dense HR jargon and generic language that fails to highlight what makes each job position unique. As a result, applicants often misinterpret or ignore vaguely written requirements and apply for roles for which they're not qualified. This leads to an overwhelming volume of applications for HR specialists to review, slowing down the process and making it harder to identify the best candidates.

When job fit is off, everything else suffers—from morale to retention. Research from the Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) shows that job fit is closely tied to key outcomes like job satisfaction, performance, and retention. Hiring Managers and HR Specialists want to find candidates who are not only qualified, but also well-matched to the work, the team, and the agency's culture. Job seekers are looking for the same thing. But according to OPM, the current JOA format makes it difficult for Hiring Managers to communicate what truly sets a position or an agency apart—leaving applicants without the information they need to assess fit.

Improving the Federal Approach to JOAs

Research has identified ways to improve the effectiveness of JOAs:

Make Them Want to Apply. Job announcements for public sector positions are more effective at attracting highly qualified and motivated applicants when they include information on a job's positive impact and announcements are generally more effective when they also include information about the organization itself.[4] This suggests that emphasizing the social impact of an agency and the alignment of a specific job vacancy to the agency's mission can enhance the appeal of federal positions. Taking

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[3] Federal Hiring Process Hiring Manager & HR Specialist's Experiences V2.1. (n.d.). [Factsheet]. Federal Hiring Experience

[4] Vogel, D., Doring, M. and Sievert, M. (2024). *Motivational signals in public sector job advertisements and how they relate to attracting and hiring candidates. Public Management Review, Vol. 26*, *No. 10*, pp. 2868-2900. https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2023.2291068

the time to highlight why applicants would want to work in this *specific role* at this *specific agency* can lead to more successful hiring outcomes.

Make it Clear. Job announcements have also been shown to attract more qualified and motivated applicants when they are informative and specific.[5] Less experienced candidates may benefit more from detailed information, suggesting that federal agencies who are recruiting from the general public should make sure to avoid jargon and provide clear descriptions of the agency culture, work environment, and expectations for position roles and responsibilities.

Make it Realistic. Job seekers tend to view announcements more positively when they believe they are realistic.[6] Realistic job previews require highlighting what makes an applicant both a good (and a poor) job fit.[7] The more informed applicants are, the better the hiring process works for everyone. When job seekers can accurately assess whether a role is right for them, they're more likely to self-select in (or out) before applying. This reduces the time and effort Hiring Managers and HR Specialists spend reviewing applications from unqualified candidates. In short, it's in the agency's best interest to be clear and transparent about what the job entails and what it's like to work there.

Make it Accessible. Where and how you share job announcements directly impacts who applies. Simply posting on USAJOBS isn't enough—especially when many potential applicants don't know to look there. Research shows that job announcements shared through the right online platforms attract higher-quality candidates.[8] Different roles require different outreach strategies. For example, a chemical engineering position is more likely to reach qualified applicants if it's promoted through professional engineering networks. To expand reach and improve applicant quality, agencies should adopt a comprehensive recruitment strategy that includes targeted platforms and professional communities aligned with the role. For hard-to-fill or high-priority vacancies, using multiple outreach methods may be necessary.[9,10] However, it's essential that all applicants are directed to apply and to ask questions through official federal channels to ensure consistency and fairness.

3 Steps to Improving Your JOA

[5] Alniacik, E and Alniacik, U. (2025). *How recruitment ad informativeness influence application intentions: mediating role of perceived fit and moderating role of employment experience. PiscoMed Publishing, Vol. 7 No. 1*. https://doi.org/10.18282/hrms3576

[6] Allen, D. et. al. (2013). *Reactions to recruitment web sites: visual and verbal attention, attraction, and intentions to pursue employment. Journal of Business and Psychology, Vol. 28, No. 3*, pp. 263-285. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24709866

[7] York, K. and Wharton, T.J. (n.d). *You want me to do what in this job? An experiential exercise in understanding the usefulness of realistic job previews for recruitment and retention. Journal of Behavioral and Applied Management, Vol, 24*, (Issue 1). https://doi.org/10.21818/001c.115904

[8] Musaba, M. et al., (2024). *A review of the effectiveness of recruitment approaches: enhancing employee quality and organizational competitiveness. American Psychological Association 7th edition, Vol. 2*, (Issue 3), pp. 341-350. https://doi.org/10.70001/idea.v2i3.181

[9] Shaha, S. (2024). *Navigating the digital frontier: a comprehensive review of social media's evolving role in contemporary recruitment. European Journal of Human Resource Management Studies, Vol. 7, No 2*. https://oapub.org/soc/index.php/EJHRMS/article/view/1658/2231

[10] Singha, S. et. al., (2024). *Innovative recruitment channels: leveraging social media and virtual job fairs for talent acquisition. Global Practices on Effective Talent Acquisition and Retention.* https://www.igi-global.com

Taking a fresh approach to JOAs can improve the hiring experience for applicants, HR Specialists, and Hiring Managers alike. By refining the information included in JOAs and strategically sharing the JOAs, agencies can tap into a broader pool of qualified candidates. When we change how we present information, we empower applicants to showcase their most relevant qualifications, enabling HR Specialists and Hiring Managers to make more informed decisions about who to advance in the hiring process. Clearly and simply presenting position expectations in JOAs allows applicants to better understand agency needs, setting them up for success as new hires.

Step 1: Make a Recruitment Strategy

To maximize visibility, take a multi-pronged approach to outreach. In addition to posting on USAJOBS, actively engage with a broad range of relevant recruitment channels and professional networks.

✓ Collect ideas from a range of professionals to develop new outreach strategies, including HR Specialists, current staff in similar positions, private-sector staff in similar positions, and relevant professional associations.

✓ Use a multi-faceted recruitment approach, including maintaining ongoing relationships with key professional networks, participating in in-person and virtual events such as job fairs and guest speaking engagements, and sharing announcements through multiple channels, e.g., LinkedIn.

Step 2: Revamp Your JOA Content

Review job announcements for subtle wording choices that may be more confusing than helpful. This can include wording that only current federal employees are likely to understand. Focus on the applicant's perspective and needs in addition to the agency's need to fill the position.

✓ Avoid technical language, agency-specific jargon, and acronyms

✓ Make sure to remove any outdated descriptions that are no longer accurate

✓ Consider using AI to check that announcements are written in plain language

✓ Clearly describe the position's key roles and responsibilities

✓ Note what skills are required now and what can be learned on the job

✓ Describe what would make someone a good (and poor) job fit

✓ Highlight the benefits of working for your office and your agency as a whole

Step 3: Continuous Improvement

Job announcements can be improved over time. Even if something is working well now, changes to either the position itself or the job market may require Hiring Managers to take stock of their approach and make adjustments. Also, revising every job announcement in an agency at once is unrealistic. Taking a continuous improvement approach is a practical way to make progress.

✓ Start by revising job announcements for positions where the agency is having the most difficulty finding sufficiently qualified candidates and retaining high-performing staff.

✓ Use data to assess the quantity and quality of the applicant pool for positions; the applicant experience, Hiring Manager experience, and HR Specialist experience during the hiring process; and new employee retention rates.

Agency Case Study
MSPB's Office of Policy and Evaluation

MSPB's Office of Policy and Evaluation (OPE) has applied these strategies in its job announcements, using research findings to enhance alignment with Merit System Principles. These changes have contributed to improvements in the applicant experience, Hiring Manager feedback, and new hire performance. We share excerpts from recent job announcements below as examples. Agencies should take stock of what is currently working for them and what new formats could fit their own needs.

Recruitment

OPE staff have created a consolidated list of our professional associations, listservs, and other networks. To enhance our reach, we also conducted a targeted search for relevant professional groups on LinkedIn. For every job announcement, we share a brief, engaging blurb with points of contact on our list, asking them to share it with their network. Our staff also share the announcement with their networks directly through emails and posts to their professional contacts. As an office, we regularly revisit our list to ensure it is comprehensive and up to date.

Our Duties section includes a detailed list of responsibilities that staff will need to perform as part of their role. However, it is unrealistic for us to assume any one person will walk in the door being able to perform all of them equally well. Our assessment process includes interview questions that focus on how well candidates can learn new skills on the job. Therefore, it is important for us to encourage highly qualified candidates to apply for positions even if they don't currently check all the boxes. It is also important for us to clearly distinguish between skills they can learn on the job and basic qualifications that are necessary to even be considered for the position. The wording below was added to our Duties section to make this clear to potential applicants.

Duties

We encourage individuals to apply for this position even if you are not currently an expert in all the position duties described below. We do not expect you to know everything; however, we do expect you to be willing to lead efforts in each of these areas. This may involve seeking outside expert advice and training on techniques for which you are not yet familiar. **Minimum required experience qualifications for the position are listed in a separate section of the job announcement.**

To help ensure the most qualified applicants apply, we try to provide an honest list of pros and cons that includes working conditions, role expectations, accomplishments, and challenges. It is important to word BOTH sides positively so that an applicant can recognize if a job is not for them due to job fit rather than experience or ability. We don't want to scare away candidates who would be a good fit for the job but may lack confidence OR make it sound like anything is wrong with someone who feels like they are not a good fit.

IS THIS JOB FOR ME?

The work of an MSPB Personnel Research Psychologist is different from that of other Personnel Research Psychologists.

This job might be for you if:

- ✓ You like working on long-term projects that have a broad impact on Government operations.

- ✓ You enjoy taking on new projects every year or two that cover a variety of topics.

- ✓ You enjoy writing for and presenting to non-technical audiences such as Federal policymakers, managers and HR Specialists.

- ✓ You enjoy the challenge of analyzing data to identify trends, patterns, and usable insights to drive agency performance and support continuous improvement.

- ✓ You like working on projects that are driven by stakeholder needs

- ✓ You enjoy working both as a member of a team and individually.

This job might NOT be for you if:

- ✗ You thrive in a high-pressure work environment where you can see the results of your work daily.

- ✗ You like to pursue a line of research on teh smae tiopic over a long period of time.

- ✗ You prefer writing for a presenting to technical audiences adn other researchers.

- ✗ You prefer to work on data that is stable and predictable and doesn't require much interpertation.

- ✗ You prefer to set your own project topics and deadlines.

- ✗ You prefer to always work alone or always work in a team.

Clear, specific job announcements strengthen merit-based hiring by giving all applicants equal access to essential information. Removing vague language and jargon helps agencies attract candidates who truly meet job requirements, supporting fair competition and upholding the integrity of the federal hiring process.

MSPB's Office of Policy and Evaluation

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The U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board has the statutory responsibility to conduct objective, non-partisan studies that evaluate Federal merit system policies, operations, and practices. See 5 U.S.C. § 1204(a)(3)