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MSPB Releases Two Reports on Federal Staffing Specialists and the Future of Federal Hiring

The U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) has released two new reports examining the Federal staffing workforce and the critical role it plays in ensuring merit-based hiring across the Federal Government: [*The Merit System's Front Line: A Profile of Federal Staffing Specialists and the Constraints They Face*](#) and [*Comparing Federal and Private Sector Staffing: Why Capacity, Timeliness, and Risk Look Different*](#). These companion reports provide new evidence and analysis intended to inform oversight, policy development, and management decisions affecting Federal hiring and workforce capacity.

The first report draws on responses from approximately 3,300 Federal staffing specialists across 20 Chief Financial Officer Act agencies and provides a detailed examination of who staffing specialists are, how they experience their work, and what challenges affect their ability to carry out staffing responsibilities. The study found that staffing specialists play a critical role in supporting the merit system, balancing operational hiring responsibilities with complex legal, regulatory, and advisory duties. At the same time, many reported significant workload pressures, staffing shortages, training constraints, and challenges associated with hiring manager knowledge of Federal hiring rules. The research highlights how these conditions can affect agency hiring capacity, workforce sustainability, and the consistent application of merit system principles.

The Merit System's Front Line – Key Findings

- Nearly half of staffing specialists reported that their workload was high.
- Insufficient staffing resources and support were identified as the most significant obstacle to effective staffing work.
- Less than half of staffing specialists believed hiring managers have a strong understanding of merit system principles, prohibited personnel practices, and Federal hiring rules.
- Despite these challenges, staffing specialists reported high levels of engagement and commitment to public service, with most indicating that their work is meaningful.

The second report places these findings in broader context by comparing Federal staffing specialists with their counterparts in the private sector. While both groups perform many of the same core hiring functions, the analysis shows that they operate within fundamentally different environments. Private-sector staffing tends to emphasize speed and flexibility, whereas Federal staffing prioritizes legal compliance, transparency, accountability, and adherence to merit system principles. These differences help explain why Federal hiring often faces unique challenges related to timeliness, capacity, and risk management.

Comparing Federal and Private Sector Staffing – Key Findings

- Federal staffing specialists operate within compliance-driven systems designed to protect fairness and legal defensibility.
- Longer tenure among Federal HR professionals supports institutional expertise but may increase succession-planning and retirement-related risks.
- Technology can improve consistency and transparency, but it may also increase cognitive demands and workload complexity.
- Staffing specialist capacity, experience, and manageable workloads are closely linked to hiring outcomes and merit system integrity.

Taken together, these reports suggest that agencies seeking to improve hiring outcomes should consider not only hiring speed, but also the staffing capacity, expertise, training, technology, and

organizational support needed to sustain merit-based hiring. The findings underscore that staffing specialists are not simply administrative processors. They serve as a critical control point in ensuring that Federal hiring remains fair, lawful, and effective.

The companion reports are intended to support agency leaders, Chief Human Capital Officers, hiring managers, oversight organizations, and policymakers as they assess the future of Federal hiring and workforce management. Together, the reports provide both an external comparison of the staffing profession and an evidence-based examination of the experiences of Federal staffing specialists responsible for protecting the merit system in practice.

The U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) is a quasi-judicial agency whose mission is to protect the Merit System Principles and promote an effective Federal workforce free of Prohibited Personnel Practices. MSPB studies are available at www.mspb.gov/studies.