

Issues of Merit

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

July 1998

Director's Perspective

Improving HRM Staffs—A Leaderless Priority

Five years ago, in the report *Federal Personnel Offices: Time for Change?* the MSPB found that over half of the managers and almost half of the personnel specialists surveyed cited “lack of sufficient skill in the personnel staff,” as a cause for deficiencies in the services provided by that staff. There is no evidence that the overall competence of federal HRM staffs has improved since that report was issued. If anything, skill levels may actually have declined in some agencies, as HRM staffs have experienced the largest decrease of any occupational group (21 percent), leaving even less time for development of the remaining employees and little opportunity to recruit new, more highly skilled employees.

The issue is not that we don't know what competencies are needed or how to develop or screen for those competencies for our nearly 40,000 personnel specialists and assistants. Work done in this area by some individual agencies, professional associations, and groups such as the National Academy of Public Administration has been very informative.

The difficulty is that an improvement in the skills and abilities of federal personnel specialists is not a governmentwide priority nor has any group or organization claimed a leadership role in this regard. By contrast, consider the following excerpts from *Budget of the United States Government, Fiscal Year 1999*. Under the heading of “Improving Performance Through Better Management,” a discussion of interagency working groups notes that:

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Outstanding Scholar: Temporary Authority or Lasting Institution?

The MSPB's Office of Policy and Evaluation is nearing completion of a study of the hiring procedures available to agencies filling entry-level professional and administrative (ACWA) positions. The study has once again drawn our attention to the alternative hiring procedures that were created by a consent decree finalized in 1981, in a court case fairly well known to many in federal human resources—*Luevano v. Campbell*. The issue in the Luevano consent decree was the adverse impact the entry-level Professional and Administrative Careers Examination (PACE) had on blacks and Hispanics. (The PACE was the predecessor of the Administrative Careers with America—ACWA—examination.)

One alternative procedure created by the decree to decrease adverse impact was the outstanding scholar hiring authority, which allows agencies to directly hire (without competition) college graduates who have a 3.5 or higher grade point average or are in the top 10 percent of their class. Although our study is still in

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OPE Focus on the Facts

Belief:

Since most new employees in the federal government tend to be hired for entry level jobs, the new hires tend to be in their twenties.

Fact:

The average age of the federal government's nearly 84,000 new hires in fiscal year 1997 was 34.6 years.

Source: MSPB calculations based on data from OPM's Central Personnel Data File

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- The President's Council on Integrity and Efficiency has, as one of two main objectives, an increase in "the professionalism and effectiveness of IG personnel across the Government;"

- The Chief Financial Officers Council has set as one of its priorities the "development of human resources and CFO organizations;"

- The Chief Information Officers Council lists among its priorities the improvement of "the information technology skills of the Federal workforce;" and

- The Federal Procurement Council seeks to "promote the Federal procurement workforce's use of good business judgment within an adaptable system of flexible rules and procedures that

allow professionals, working in a continuous learning environment, to use discretion."

The common theme among these councils is that program improvement in their areas of concern—audit and investigation, finance, information technology, and procurement—depends on improving the skills and competencies of the federal employees working in those areas. Improved technology, systems, and policies are all important, but real progress also requires upgrading and maintaining the capabilities of the employees with major responsibilities in those program areas.

The Interagency Advisory Group (IAG) of Federal Personnel Directors was established to provide leadership in a number of HRM areas, but the IAG charter does not include any specific mention of staff competency.

The Office of Personnel Management's strategic plan makes note of the problem but pledges only to work with others to "improve opportunities for professional development."

It would seem, therefore, that what is needed to address this long standing concern is active leadership on the part of the IAG or OPM, or, if necessary, legislation comparable to that passed in recent years for other functional areas. Without effective leadership focused on specific actions to improve the skills and capabilities of HRM staff, it's unlikely we'll see any sustainable improvement in federal human resources management overall.

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Outstanding Scholar *(continued from page 1)*

progress, we can share some information about the history of the outstanding scholar authority and some facts about its use.

As the chart below shows, the outstanding scholar authority has become a key means for hiring entry-level applicants for ACWA jobs. In each of the 5 years depicted, agencies hired between 4,000 and 6,000 ACWA candidates from outside the government, with about one-third to one-half each year being appointed through the outstanding scholar authority.

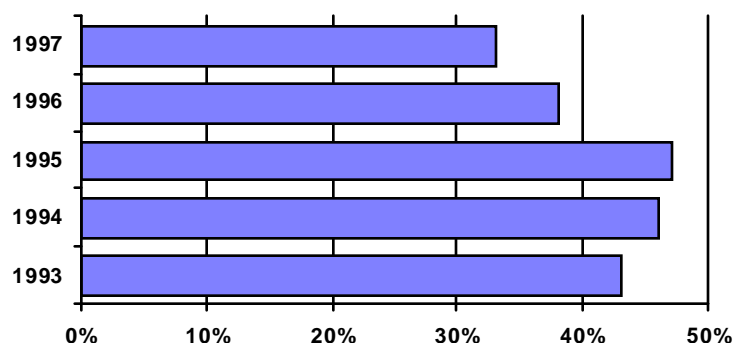
Because that's a considerable number of new hires using that single method, it's fair to ask whether this is what the court intended when the consent decree was approved. The record suggests not.

In the consent decree the stated purpose of the outstanding scholar authority was clear: "...to eliminate adverse impact against

blacks and Hispanics" during the 3-year period the Court was expected to retain jurisdiction over the case while OPM developed "alternative examining procedures. . . for those job categories subject to the PACE." Although OPM in 1990 introduced those alternative procedures—the ACWA exam series—the exam is rarely used, and the Court still has

jurisdiction over the matter 17 years later. Further, our calculations using data from OPM's Central Personnel Data File show that today, white women, not blacks and Hispanics, are the single largest category of job applicants to be hired using the outstanding scholar program. It's possible that one factor in agencies' heavy use of

Percent of ACWA New Hires Hired Through the Outstanding Scholar Authority



Source: MSPB calculations based on data from OPM's Central Personnel Data File.

the authority to hire white women is that their representation in the federal workforce is not yet in proportion to their presence in the civilian labor force.

Whatever the reasons for agencies' frequent use of the outstanding scholar authority, the consent decree was clear that the authority was intended as a supplement to the interim use of the PACE or the alternative examining procedures replacing the PACE. Our preliminary analysis of OPM's figures shows that with 33 to 47 percent of entry-level professional and administrative hiring taking place through this one authority over the past 5 years, the outstanding scholar authority has become a long term, major fixture of the government's hiring systems rather than a strictly supplemental hiring procedure.

Our study is raising important questions about the use of the outstanding scholar authority which we will continue to explore in the months ahead. We plan to issue a full report of our findings later this year.

HR Oversight: A Work in Progress

In a recently completed study of OPM's HRM oversight program, the Board found a revitalized operation that attempts to make oversight of agency personnel programs more relevant to agencies and to the results-oriented environment of the 90s. The new oversight program is a decided improvement over the one last reviewed by the Board (in 1992), and it has increased its value to agencies by expanding oversight reviews to include subjects that agencies have expressed interest in.

At the same time, our study findings suggest that many agencies continue to question the usefulness of OPM's attempts to help them do their jobs.

In 1995 OPM restructured the oversight program and established the following roles:

- ◆ To protect and promote a merit-based federal civil service;
- ◆ To identify opportunities for improving federal personnel policies and programs; and
- ◆ To help agencies meet mission goals through effective recruitment, development, and use of employees.

We asked federal departments and independent agencies—the 23 largest, as well as 23 small agencies and departmental components—to give us their views on how well OPM is fulfilling these roles.

The agencies gave OPM generally high marks for its first role, its capacity to protect and promote a

The line between help and interference can be a tough one to negotiate.

merit-based civil service. Over half of the large agencies and over a quarter of the small agencies rated OPM's effectiveness in this role as very great. Agencies that had undergone reviews since the program was overhauled in 1995 were somewhat more positive than agencies that hadn't been reviewed, and over a third of smaller agencies said that they didn't know or couldn't judge OPM's effectiveness.

Agencies hold a more negative view of OPM's effectiveness in identifying opportunities to improve federal HRM. Just over a quarter of large agencies and only 16 percent of small agencies rated OPM's effectiveness in this role as very great. The study found that OPM intends to make better progress towards this goal by improving its approach to sharing best practices information, and possibly

by sharing information on worst practices.

The third goal, that of helping agencies meet their mission goals through effective personnel practices may be the most difficult to achieve, possibly because "help" is so very much in the eye of the beholder, and because the line between help and interference can be a tough one to negotiate. Agencies still see OPM evaluators as more compliance-oriented than they need to be or agencies want them to be. Not surprisingly, then, agencies gave OPM their lowest grades on this goal, with just 22 percent of the large agencies and 14 percent of the small ones rating the oversight program's effectiveness as very great, and around a third of agencies rating the program not effective in helping meet mission goals.

Although the study found agency perceptions about the oversight program's effectiveness to be mixed at best, we also found that OPM is aware of the problems facing the program and the refinements needed to improve it. The oversight staff are working on improving consistency in evaluation approach, better dissemination of information obtained in the course of oversight reviews, and focusing on the accountability (or lack thereof) of line managers as their personnel authority continues to expand.

This edition of "Issues of Merit" is dedicated to the memory of Edward F. Preston. Ed left the government payroll in 1985 after a long and distinguished federal career. However, it was only upon his death on June 8 that Ed left the public service. Until then, Ed had continued to serve as a very effective advocate for good government and the merit system through his active involvement in a number of volunteer activities and associations dedicated to those purposes. Ed's memory will inspire many who continue in these efforts.

How Do Supervisors Decide Who Gets Awards?

In the last *Issues of Merit* (May 1998) we described some of the factors that federal supervisors consider when making decisions about selecting and promoting employees. But what about other kinds of personnel decisions that supervisors make on a regular basis? One such decision that's very important to employees is who receives performance awards. What factors enter the equation when a supervisor is trying to

decide how performance awards should be distributed? Individual achievements and accomplishments were also very high on the list of factors considered when deciding on performance awards, as were the annual performance ratings of employees and comments from work unit customers.

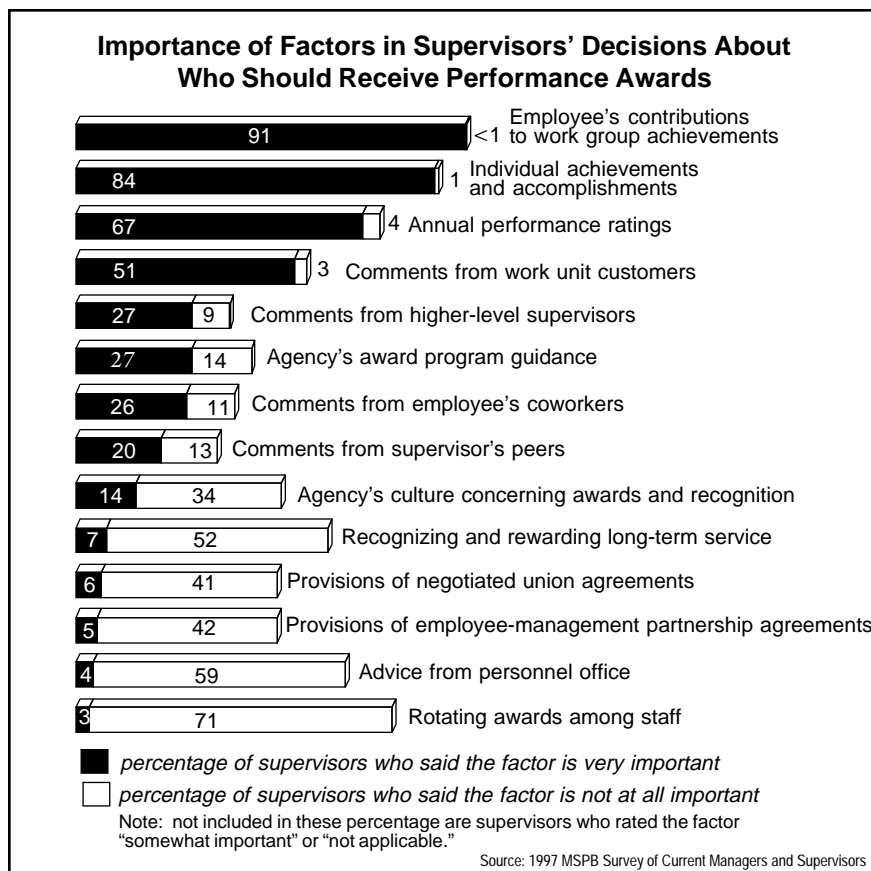
However, perhaps contrary to popular belief among nonsupervisory employees, the majority of these supervisors reported that factors such as rotation of awards among staff members, advice from their personnel office, and recognition/reward of long term service do *not* play a role in their decisions about performance awards.

own personnel system have made many federal managers think that only exemption from existing laws and regulations will solve their human resources management problems. Yet, when MSPB surveys have asked managers what their human resources concerns are, we have found that many of them can be dealt with using flexibilities that already exist in the current system. Not everything managers need to do with respect to personnel issues needs new legislation.

Federal human resources advisors have an important role in proactively identifying managers' HR concerns and in knowing how to address them within the context of current personnel laws and regulations, as expressed in title 5 of the U. S. Code and title 5 of the Code of Federal Regulations. To assist in identifying the flexibilities available, OPM has published its "Template of Personnel Flexibilities," which systematically discusses the options within the existing human resources system for meeting managers' special needs. For example, agencies are permitted (without consulting with OPM) to decide which positions qualify for payment of a new appointee's travel expenses to the first post of duty. Agencies can also decide—on their own—which interviewees are eligible for payment of pre-employment interview expenses. An agency can arrange for a temp from a commercial temporary service agency when circumstances such as family responsibilities, illness, or mandatory jury duty keep a regular employee away from the job.

The template is available on the OPM website (www.opm.gov). Although it discusses options such as waivers of OPM requirements and demonstration authorities that are not available to many HR managers, it also presents a number of options that require no special authority. It is an excellent jump-

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decide how performance awards should be distributed?

According to over 2,600 federal supervisors whom we surveyed, the employee's contributions to the work group's achievements is the most critical factor in the decision. As shown in the figure above, 91 percent of the supervisors said this was very important in their deci-

Using What We've Got

Recent legislation authorizing complete new human resources systems for FAA and IRS, and DOD's announced intention to introduce legislation to create significant new flexibilities in its

ing-off place for searching for non-legislative solutions to problems that managers are facing.

New Video Technology Is a Hit

Beginning in 1997 MSPB launched an exciting technology initiative using videoconferencing. Faced with declining resources both at MSPB and within the agencies it serves, the Board has been exploring several uses of technology to save money as well as time and energy, and to serve customers better. The project began with room videoconferencing systems at Headquarters and five regional offices, and just recently added three field offices to the system.

MSPB and participating agencies have found videoconferencing a powerful enhancement to meetings and discovered that videoconferencing provides a new “connection” for remote participants. Administrative judges who hear appeals have found videoconferencing a powerful tool in increasing their efficiency and providing appellants and agencies with a new way to accomplish this mission. As one judge noted, the use of videoconferencing reduces the “physical wear” on the judges because it saves them the time and aggravation they experience traveling. And it’s a good deal for the Board because it saves travel costs and avoids judges’ downtime necessitated by travel.

Witnesses, appellants, and agency and appellant representatives—among the Board’s major customers—all have had good things to say about the new system. After one recent hearing conducted via videoconferencing, a federal agency located in California wrote the Board to say how satisfied they were with MSPB’s use of the new technology. The agency representative found “very little difference” between hearings conducted in person and through videoconfer-

ence. And because the representative and the agency witnesses didn’t have to travel to Los Angeles, they all were able to return to their duty stations immediately following their testimony, saving the agency a considerable amount of money. Another recent case involved a video hearing with participants in Germany and the Washington area. After twenty minutes the case settled, and thousands of dollars in time and travel costs were saved.

Videoconferencing has also been used by the Board for training, all-employee briefings, and job applicant interviews. With the inevitable savings in time and money, and with the positive reviews coming from users, the technology is proving to be an extremely useful tool for a growing number of applications.

HRM Connections

A June 1997 GAO report noted that 42 federal organizations reported having some 4,300 websites and 215 electronic dial-up bulletin board systems. The 42 organizations estimated that they provided Internet e-mail access to about half (or 1.7 million) of their civilian and military employees and Internet website access to nearly a third (about 1 million) employees.

With e-mail and Internet access becoming an integral part of how many federal workers do business, a major challenge is managing the available information. The dangers of information overload are real for the government’s HRM community no less than for employees in other professions. This article, the first in an occasional series, is intended to help direct HR workers to electronic resources that might be particularly useful.

A first recommendation is to choose one of the Internet’s search engines and become very familiar with it. There are advantages and disadvantages associated with each of the available search engines, but

for most purposes, familiarity with either www.altavista.com or www.yahoo.com will suffice.

A second recommendation is to install the free Adobe Acrobat reader program on your computer system. This program will let you view, download, and print the large variety of publications made available in PDF format. The PDF format retains the look of the paper version of the publications and doesn’t require you to own the software program that originally produced the publications. Instructions for downloading and installing the reader can be found on most websites containing PDF files or at www.adobe.com. You may wish to consult your information technology personnel on how to properly install and use this reader.

A third recommendation is to subscribe to one or more of the excellent electronic newsletters related to HR management. You can register and subscribe by visiting the website of the newsletter provider. Some newsletters to consider include:

FedNews Online, daily, from www.fpmi.com—HRM issues affecting the civil service.

GovExec.com, weekly, from www.govexec.com—top stories and breaking news; many direct links to other useful websites.

FEDmanager, weekly, from www.fedmanager.com—HRM issues of particular interest to federal managers.

FEDweek, weekly, from www.fedweek.com—HRM issues of general interest to all federal employees.

We’ll be taking a look at other websites in future *Issues of Merit*.

Just arrived!



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* Most of these reports are available for downloading from the MSPB home page: <http://www.mspb.gov>

“Issues of Merit” provides findings and recommendations drawn from MSPB research on topics and issues relevant to the effective operation of the federal merit systems and the significant actions of the Office of Personnel Management.