insights & analyses for Federal human capital management

ISSUES OF MERIT

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Engaging Employees with Job Design and Rewards

What can managers and agency leadership do to foster greater engagement from Federal employees?

MSPB research has shown the importance of engagement for an effective and efficient workforce and has discussed the essential role of supervisors in promoting employee engagement.[1] Engaging Federal employees to perform at a higher level is essential to reducing the cost and increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of Government. Yet, the task of engaging Federal employees has been complicated by fiscal constraints, impending retirements, continuing concern about Federal employee performance and accountability, and debate over the competitiveness and sustainability of Federal employee pay and benefits.

A forthcoming MSPB report discusses how to foster employee engagement by using motivating aspects of rewards and job design. The objective of this report is to help agencies use the motivating features of rewards and job design characteristics to support employee motivation and encourage job performance and organizational effectiveness.

Specifically, this report—

- Examines the relationship between motivation and job characteristics;
- Examines the connection between employees' effort, performance, and rewards with their motivation;
- Discusses the perceived importance of rewards such as awards and bonuses, personal satisfaction, and developmental opportunities;
- Shows how motivation is related to indicators of job performance; and
- Describes steps Federal agencies and Federal managers can take to support motivation, with a focus on job characteristics and rewards.

The good news is that most Federal employees surveyed reported being motivated by their work. More than 70 percent agreed or strongly agreed with "I feel highly motivated in my work." However the percentage of Federal employees who agreed with the statement varied by agency, ranging from about 61 percent to 77 percent, demonstrating that

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1. U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *The Power of Federal Employee Engagement*, September 2008; and U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *Managing for Engagement—Communication, Connection, and Courage*, July 2009.

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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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DIRECTOR'S PERSPECTIVE

A Look Back to Look Forward

Departing Office of Policy and Evaluation Director John Crum offers a perspective from his thirty-four years of Government service.

I have worked in the world of Federal human resources management for over 34 years and the time has come for me to discover what the future holds beyond Federal employment. During my years in the Federal Government many things have changed—some for the better, some for the worse—yet much seems to have remained the same. In my final Director's Column, I will outline some lessons that I believe can be learned from this history.

People, not programs, are the key to managing and improving performance. When I entered Federal service, efforts were being made to tie employee pay to job performance through an initiative called merit pay. The Federal Government spent millions to train supervisors and employees in the use of objective performance standards. Nevertheless, the initiative was widely disliked and ultimately discontinued. More recently, the Department of Defense included pay-for-performance elements in its National Security Personnel System, with the goal of increasing employee accountability and performance. For a variety of reasons, NSPS was also discontinued.

These initiatives struggled not because the concept was bad but because implementation is so difficult. The underlying concerns, such as motivating Federal employees, making judicious and credible use of salary and award monies, and improving organizational performance, are both important and difficult. In particular, the appropriate level and form of compensation for Federal employees—a matter of great debate when I began working for the Government—is a complex issue and not easily resolved. Still, I hope we have learned that *people* are the key to problems of employee motivation and organizational performance. The solutions begin with performance management practices and fostering conditions that support employee engagement. I hope we have learned that effective performance management depends more on improvement in communication between supervisors and employees than on the development of quantified, perfectly "objective" performance standards (a task likely to prove both frustrating and futile).

Messages matter. During my initial years in Federal service, a common campaign theme was that Federal employees were underworked and overpaid. The rhetoric today is quite similar. Clearly, "bureaucrat bashing" has not gone out of style. Of course, Federal employees should be subject to, and prepared to withstand, public scrutiny. However, stakeholders should recognize that reflexive and relentless criticism of Federal employees may injure rather than improve Federal Government efficiency. That risk is heightened by changes in the Federal workforce. Thirty years ago, the Federal Government employed a substantial percentage of its workforce in clerical, process-centered occupations. Today's Federal workforce is a knowledge workforce, with a majority of employees in professional and administrative occupations, such as attorney and information technology specialist.

For now, the Federal Government is

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Director's Perspective

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well-positioned to compete for talent. However, that may well change as economic conditions improve. Moreover, inevitable (if deferred) retirements mean that Federal agencies will soon need to fill many positions that are, by their very nature, not easy to fill. If bureaucrat bashing and changes to other terms of Federal employment (such as pay and benefits) make such employment unattractive, the Federal Government will be hard-pressed to recruit the competent, committed employees needed to deliver critical services to the American public.

Money is not everything. On a positive note, we have gained a better understanding of how to differentiate the Federal Government from other employers. Research has shown that most people do not become Federal employees for the money. Instead, they chose Government service because they believe in their agency's mission and want to make a difference. Federal agencies can do more to market these aspects of Federal employment. We also have additional ammunition that can help the Federal Government in the war for talent. For example, alternative work schedules and telework can help attract new employees by affording them the flexibility to balance the demands of their everyday lives.

In closing, some concerns and challenges have proved more lasting and intractable than I hoped many years ago. Nevertheless, I leave Federal service with a sense of accomplishment and optimism. Over my career, we have indeed made significant progress and laid the groundwork for continued improvement in the Federal service. ❖



Former Director, Policy and Evaluation

MSPB Welcomes New Member Mark Robbins

Mark A. Robbins was sworn in as Member of the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) on May 16, 2012. He was nominated by President Obama on December 5, 2011 and confirmed by the U.S. Senate on April 26, 2012. Mr. Robbins is serving the remainder of the 7-year term that will expire on March 1, 2018.

Chairman Susan Tsui Grundmann welcomed Mr. Robbins, stating, "I am delighted that Mark has joined the Board. His experience and talents are considerable, and we are fortunate to have him at the agency. I look forward to working with Mark in the years ahead."

Vice Chairman Anne Wagner commented, "I join Chairman Grundmann in warmly welcoming Mark Robbins as a Board Member. It is good to have a full complement of Board Members again, and we look forward to working with Mark and his office."

Upon being sworn in, Mr. Robbins expressed, "I am honored by the President's nomination and the Senate's confirmation, and excited to begin working with the Chairman, Vice Chairman, and staff of the MSPB. MSPB has an important mission, which all of us take very seriously."

At the time of his nomination, Mr. Robbins was the General Counsel of the U.S. Election Assistance Commission. In that capacity, Mr. Robbins worked to certify elections systems and maintain information on the best practices of conducting elections. He previously served as a Senior Rule of Law Advisor for the State Department in Babil Province, Iraq. He also served as Executive Director of the White House Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board between 2006 and 2008 and as General Counsel of the Office of Personnel Management from 2001 to 2006. He worked in private practice as a litigation attorney in Los Angeles, California between 1988 and 2000, and in the White House Office of Presidential Personnel from 1984 to 1988.

Domestic Violence Policies for the Federal Workplace

President Obama calls on agencies to establish policies to address domestic violence in the Federal workforce.

Earlier this year President Obama issued a memorandum that called for policies to be established for addressing domestic violence in the Federal workforce. That memorandum noted that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimate that domestic violence costs the U.S. $8 billion a year in lost productivity and health care costs alone. In addition, many victims of domestic violence are harassed in the workplace or experience other ill employment-related effects. The memorandum calls for the Federal Government, as the nation's largest employer, to be a model in responding to the effects of domestic violence on its workforce.

To that end, the memorandum directed agencies to send their policies and practices for addressing the effects of domestic violence in the workplace to the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). In a subsequent memorandum, the OPM Director stated that upon receipt and review of agency policies, OPM will, in consultation with agencies that have expertise related to domestic violence, issue guidance on the content of these policies. OPM's guidance will include steps agencies can take as employers for the early intervention in and prevention of domestic violence.

MSPB recently undertook a study to examine violence—physical assaults, threats of assault, harassment, intimidation, or bullying—in the Federal workplace. Perpetrators of workplace violence are typically placed into one of four categories—employees or former employees; individuals whose only connection to the workplace is to commit a criminal act; customers or clients; and individuals whose connection to the workplace stems from a personal relationship with an employee that is, for example, an employee's abusive intimate partner.

Our study is based on results from the 2010 Merit Principles Survey (MPS)—42,020 Federal employees responded to this MSPB survey for a response rate of 58 percent. Results indicate that current or former employees are the most frequent perpetrators of violence in the Federal workplace. However, 7 percent of the survey respondents who had observed an incident of workplace violence over the past two years reported the incident was perpetrated by an employee's abusive intimate partner. Thirty percent of these observations resulted in either a physical injury or damage to (or loss of) property.

As the Presidential memorandum noted, the effects of domestic violence in the workplace go beyond it being the site for a violent event—which is what our MPS data focused on. The CDC has estimated that, nationally, 96 percent of victims of domestic violence experience work-related problems, and that 30 percent of victims actually lose their jobs due to attendance or performance issues.

Among MPS 2010 participants who had witnessed workplace violence perpetrated by criminals or customers, approximately half agreed that their agencies take sufficient steps to ensure their safety from violence occurring at their workplace. However, only about one-third of employees agreed who had witnessed workplace violence perpetrated by employees, former employees, or individuals with a personal relationship with an employee. Although most other employees believe their agencies are taking sufficient steps to ensure their safety, this disparity may indicate that employees believe their agencies could do more to ensure their safety from violence perpetrated by their colleagues and their colleagues' abusive intimate partners. The President's initiative to address domestic violence in the Federal workforce may help to remedy this disparity.

When issued, the report summarizing MSPB's workplace violence study will be available at www.mspb.gov/studies. ❖

Domestic Violence Web Sites

Presidential Memorandum: Establishing Policies for Addressing Domestic Violence in the Federal Workforce — http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/04/18/presidential-memorandum-establishing-policies-addressing-domestic-violen.

Federal Domestic Violence Laws — www.justice.gov/usao/gan/documents/federallaws.pdf.

Office on Violence Against Women — www.ovw.usdoj.gov.

Partnering to Pay the Bill for Telework

Just as telework provides flexibility in where work is accomplished, it may require flexibility to fund associated technology and equipment.

As discussed in MSPB's report, *Telework: Weighing the Information, Determining an Appropriate Approach,*[1] access to the right technology and equipment is a critical enabler for successful telework. Teleworkers will need remote access to their existing business tools to provide seamlessness between working in the office and working at home. Similarly, technologies will need to be available and easily accessible that support continuity in quality and quantity of communication and teamwork efforts, as well as work relationships.

What is the right combination of tools for telework? It depends. As with the other considerations for telework, there is unlikely to be a one-size-fits-all solution for entire organizations, or even for work groups and individual employees within organizations. Factors such as mission, culture, job functions, sensitivity of work, and interdependency among employees for work tasks, will result in variations in what constitutes the right suite of technology and equipment for telework. Further, the adaptability of each organization's current technological infrastructure to meet telework demands will also play a role. And there will be differences in what each organization determines is necessary and feasible from a financial standpoint. These factors need to be strategically balanced against telework benefits, other implementation considerations,[2] and participation requirements of the 2010 Telework Enhancement Act.[3]

Yet, a less discussed consideration that is intertwined with determining the right suite of telework tools is: who pays for telework technology and equipment? Is it appropriate to expect employees to purchase computers, printers, telephones, etc., to telework, or should organizations be required to furnish such tools for teleworkers? What about teleworkers' home internet and telephone bills, and home office furniture? To the extent that organizations fund anything for teleworkers, how will they ensure perceptions of equity by non-teleworkers? Further, if employees use (or are required to use) their own technology and equipment, who should fund technical support for this personal equipment? Where does an organization draw the line?

Again, it depends. Each organization's situation is unique, as are its optimal solutions for telework. The answer may evolve over time in light of changes to budget appropriations and work demands. However, one constant across all organizations is that teleworkers should have realistic (and flexible) expectations for what their organizations should provide. This frame of mind is essential given the austere fiscal climate enveloping most Federal agencies. Further, teleworkers should be prepared to work with their organizations, information technology staff, and supervisors to identify the best telework technology and equipment solutions for their roles and jobs, and to separate their telework technology needs from their desires. This also may require willingness from teleworkers to be partially or fully responsible for funding resultant technology and equipment to support their teleworking. Similarly—and in tandem— organizations should be prepared to take strategic steps to provide their employees with technology and equipment for telework, keeping in mind that many solutions could be phased in during regular equipment and technology refreshes.[4] Such a gradual approach by organizations would naturally spread out the costs for telework technology and equipment over a longer period of time. This distribution would be more financially palatable for organizations, and would make it more feasible to implement optimal telework solutions.

It could be advantageous for organizations to enter into a partnership with teleworkers regarding the funding of telework tools. Just as telework provides flexibility in where work is accomplished, it also requires flexibility to fund the associated technology and equipment that makes it possible. ❖

1. *See* MSPB's report, *Telework: Weighing the Information, Determining an Appropriate Approach*, directly accessible in PDF form from the studies page of MSPB's web site.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *See* the Telework Enhancement Act of 2010 accessed from: http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-111publ292/pdf/PLAW-111publ292.pdf.
4. The Telework Enhancement Act of 2010 specifies that "the Director of the Office of Management and Budget shall issue policy guidance requiring each executive agency when purchasing computer systems, to purchase computer systems that enable and support telework, unless the head of the agency determines that there is a mission-specific reason not to do so." 5 U.S.C. § 6504(f).

Job Design and Rewards

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the Government cannot always be evaluated as a single employer. These results suggest that there is room for improvement in motivating Federal employees.

The report answers several questions:

Why are some jobs more motivating than others? Certain job characteristics, such as task variety, task significance, and autonomy can influence both motivation and job performance. For example, employees in jobs that were meaningful, that involved greater variety of activities, and that represented an entire function, rather than pieces of a larger job, are more likely to have higher performance ratings than employees with jobs without these characteristics. Similarly, employees in jobs that offered them the freedom to decide how work should be done and that provided performance feedback tended to have higher performance than employees in jobs without these features. However, there were indications that Federal agencies and Federal managers can do more to make Federal jobs truly motivating. Only 21 percent of Federal employees reported feeling highly positive about their combined job characteristics. The report offers suggestions for addressing these opportunities for improvement to better support employee motivation.

Which rewards are most motivating? In general, Federal employees were more motivated by nonmonetary rewards than monetary rewards. When we asked Federal employees to assess the importance of various rewards to seeking and continuing employment with the organization, they rated personal satisfaction, having interesting work, and job security as the most important. The rewards rated least important were informal perks, awards and bonuses, and forgiveness for small mistakes.

The results suggest that incentives—providing positive consequences for positive efforts and results—can make a difference in motivation and performance, when they are effectively designed and delivered. The more that employees believed that greater efforts will lead to higher performance, and that higher performance will lead to valued rewards, the more likely they were to have recently received a high performance appraisal rating. However, many employees believed that the relationship between effort and reward was weak at best. Only about 23 percent of Federal employees see a strong connection between the effort they exert, the performance rating that this effort generated, and the valued rewards that the performance garnered. The report describes ways to tighten these connections and better administer rewards to support employee motivation.

What can leaders do to make rewards motivating? Our findings indicate that employees need to believe that their efforts lead to high-level job performance and that performance level leads to desired rewards. Therefore, it is important for supervisors to become familiar with employees' desires and to reflect them in reward decisions. Rewards work best when they are desired and linked to both individual and unit-level performance to strengthen incentives for individual employees to contribute to organizational goals. However care is warranted in ensuring that the opportunity to earn rewards is equitably distributed. Rewards must be uniquely desired by each employee and tied to a particular level of performance within each level. For example, if an employee opts for a time off award instead of a cash award to recognize his or her outstanding rating of record, the amount of time off that is given should have the same approximate value as the monetary award that could have been given.

How can jobs be designed to foster motivation and engagement? The benefits of good job design are not limited to organizational efficiency. Good job design—structuring jobs to maximize desirable characteristics, including the ability to succeed—can also increase employee motivation, leading to gains in effort, innovation, and performance. Accordingly, it is important to develop work environments in which employees are well matched with work they find interesting and to job characteristics they find desireable. For example, desire for autonomy varies by employee but most respond well to being given the freedom to schedule work and determine how and when to do job tasks. Structure and direction are important, but an excess of either can be counterproductive. Jobs composed of tasks that are overly constricted by rules and procedures, or that require supervisor approval for even minor variations from routine, can reduce motivation and levels of performance.

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Whistleblower Protection Law—The Agency is Responsible

If an agency official, acting because of a desire to retaliate, influences another agency official who is unaware of the improper motive when implementing a personnel action, the agency is nevertheless responsible for the retaliation.

Recently, in *Dorney v. Department of the Army*, 117 M.S.P.R. 480 (2012), the Board explained this principle once again. In *Dorney*, an individual who had been employed by Army allegedly made protected disclosures of wrongdoing by her supervisor, and later left the agency. After several years had passed, she applied for a position with Army under a different supervisor. There were no indications that the selecting supervisor knew of the appellant's protected disclosures but it was undisputed that the selecting official based his decision, in part, on the negative reference provided by the prior supervisor who likely knew of the disclosures and was the object of those disclosures. As a result, if the appellant could prove that the initial supervisor acted out of a retaliatory animus, then she would have proven that the *agency* acted out of the animus, even if the official who made the final decision had no desire to retaliate at all.

The lesson for supervisors who wish to avoid involvement in retaliatory actions is not to assume that a single reference is accurate or that a reference provider is being honest. As explained in our report, *Reference Checking in Federal Hiring: Making the Call*, even if a reference is from a trusted source, the selecting official should make an effort to confirm the accuracy of the information that has been provided. An official tricking someone else into taking a retaliatory action does not remove the liability for the agency. ❖

Training at the bargain price of... Free?

The mission of the Office of Policy and Evaluation (OPE) is to examine issues affecting the efficiency and effectiveness of the civil service and provide information and advice to Federal agencies and other stakeholders about findings.

We are exploring how we can best use our limited resources to help agencies assimilate our research findings. To this end, we have created "mini-briefings" or short videos (under 10 minutes) containing salient points from our reports. We currently have one mini-briefing for our most recent report on whistleblowing and one mini-briefing for our report on perceptions of prohibited personnel practices (PPPs).

These mini-briefings are free to view and available to the public through the MSPB Training link on the home page of our web site. Please let us know if you find our mini-briefings helpful and if you have any suggestions for improving them.

Job Design and Rewards

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Jobs may also be made more motivating and engaging by providing employees with information about the link between their jobs, the department's goals, the organization's mission and success, and ultimately the impact on the general public. By collecting and sharing such information employees can better understand how well they and their organizations are performing. Whether it comes directly from supervisors and customers or indirectly from organizational productivity indicators, employee knowledge of results is important to work motivation. By emphasizing how the job fits in and how important the employee's contributions are to the mission, performance motivation tends to increase.

As the Government strives for a more efficient and effective Federal workforce—and various forces increasingly press for this—leaders may find encouragement in our research on the motivating aspects of job characteristics and rewards. Our report focuses on using motivation to encourage employee engagement and help improve job performance. Ultimately, this effect can lead to increased efficiency and effectiveness for the entire agency—if management remains focused on employees as individuals and on aspects of the job and workplace aspects that employees value. ❖

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