

# ISSUES OF MERIT

September 2021

a publication of  
the U.S. Merit Systems  
Protection Board,  
Office of Policy  
and Evaluation

## WHAT'S INSIDE

**Director's  
Perspective**  
Page 3

**Supervisors and  
Performance Ratings**  
Page 4

**Non-Critical Elements**  
Page 5

**Supervisors' Role in  
Building Camaraderie**  
Page 6

**Workforce Recruitment  
Program**  
Page 7

## Post-Pandemic Telework: An Epidemic of Efficiency?

*Data and lessons learned from the pandemic should drive future workforce policies.*

In June 2021, the Office of Management and Budget, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), and the General Services Administration released memorandum M-21-25, requiring agencies to complete planning for determining how and when to return Federal employees to the workplace. The guidance gave agencies the ability to “deploy personnel policies such as telework, remote work, and flexible work schedules as strategic management tools to be competitive in the broader labor market in attracting, retaining, and engaging talent.”

Additional guidance issued by OPM in July suggested that agencies start reassessing work schedules and frequency of telework based upon their experiences during the pandemic, and reestablish them in a way that best meets mission needs. OPM also noted that supervisors “may see mission delivery, productivity, or employee engagement benefits in extending flexibilities related to telework and alternative work schedules.”

In 2011, the Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) published the report *Telework: Weighing the Information, Determining an Appropriate Approach*. This report discussed issues and considerations that organizations should weigh when deciding how to integrate telework into their business strategies and operations. Many of the themes from the report are relevant to today's circumstance. It discussed the various benefits telework can have for individual employees, as well as the overall organization. It also pointed out challenges organizations would likely face in implementing telework programs. Below are some of the key takeaways agencies should consider as they identify how telework and other workplace flexibilities will be used to support the mission post-pandemic.

Managers and supervisors should recognize that the optimal approach to telework will continue to evolve over time, and may evolve differently within different work units. They should be flexible and open to trying new approaches, working through any issues that may arise. In addition, agencies should use their own return-to-work surveys, results of the annual Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS), and productivity measures to make informed, data-driven decisions about post-pandemic telework.

Agency leaders must also ensure that supervisors are prepared for their role and can manage teleworkers and non-teleworkers effectively. Supervisors must have effective

## ISSUES OF MERIT

U.S. Merit Systems  
Protection Board

**ACTING CHIEF EXECUTIVE AND  
ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER**  
Tristan Leavitt

Office of Policy and Evaluation

**ACTING  
DIRECTOR**  
James J. Tsugawa

### 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.

### Reuse Permission

We invite you to reuse any of our articles. If you do, please include attribution, such as: *Originally published in Issues of Merit, a publication of the Office of Policy and Evaluation, U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board.*

### For More Information

Contact us at:  
[www.mspb.gov/studies](http://www.mspb.gov/studies)  
STUDIES@mspb.gov  
202-254-4802  
1-800-209-8960  
V/TDD: 202-653-8896  
(TTY users may use the Federal Relay Service, 800-877-8339)

U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board  
Office of Policy and Evaluation  
1615 M Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20419

(continued from previous page)

performance management skills to make sound decisions about telework eligibility and continuing its use, and to ensure fair treatment of teleworkers and non-teleworkers. Objective performance management practices can help supervisors exercise good and fair judgment and make decisions based on employee merit and not solely on employee location.

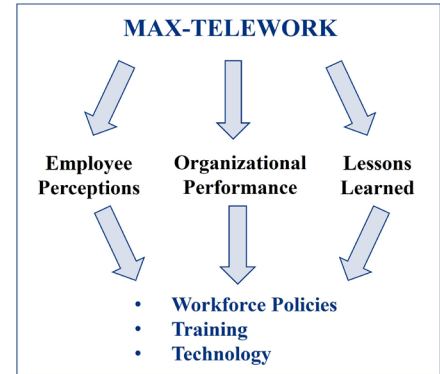
Employees also have a role to play in agency telework programs. They should assess their own work habits and preferred routines to determine what level of telework, if any, is right for them. Not all employees or jobs are suitable for telework. Employees who telework should maintain their performance and fully engage with their supervisors, coworkers, customers, and other relevant parties.

Telework has many potential benefits for organizations and employees alike. In addition to organizational benefits in areas such as continuity of operations, emergency preparedness, need for less office space, and enhanced recruitment and retention, telework can also yield employee benefits in the areas of work-life balance, reduced commuting time and cost, and improved employee engagement. As noted in our report, our survey results show an association between telework and employee engagement: 65 percent of employees who agreed that their supervisor encourages and supports telework were engaged, compared with only 31 percent of employees who disagreed. In addition, OPM reported in its analysis of conditions that drive employee engagement that employees who telework have higher scores on that measure than employees who do not telework (based on FEVS results from 2012-2015).

OPM's 2020 FEVS also looked at the impact of maximum telework and more flexible work schedules during the pandemic. OPM's *Governmentwide Management Report* indicates that workplace flexibilities played a significant role in ensuring employees were able to meet work and family responsibilities. Prior to the pandemic, only 3 percent of employees teleworked daily, but that number grew to a record 59 percent at the peak of the pandemic. In addition, the FEVS results demonstrate that even during a time of maximum telework and more flexible work schedules, over 80 percent of respondents agreed that the people they work with cooperate to get the job done, their agency is successful at accomplishing its mission, and they know how their work relates to the agency's goals. These results obviously differ by agency and even by organization/office, but they indicate that it is important to consider how these flexibilities affected organizational mission accomplishment during very trying times to map the path forward.

The use of post-pandemic telework may increase in Federal organizations based on the experience they gained with this workplace flexibility during the pandemic. To determine what level of telework is appropriate, those organizations should carefully review data regarding such things as organizational productivity and employee attitudes during the period of maximum telework. Such important considerations should not be left solely to individual desires or beliefs that office productivity automatically improves when more employees are physically in the work space. ❖

### FROM PAST EXPERIENCE TO FUTURE PRACTICE



## So You Want to be a Change Agent

*Here are some steps that may help increase the likelihood that you can effect successful change.*

If you've worked in the Federal Government for a while you'll have heard (or asked yourself) the question, "Why do we do *this*?" or "Why don't we do *that*?" Often, the "that" is a human resources (HR) practice advocated by a high-profile company or expert, or one believed to be how everyone else does business. For example, some years ago the questions were, "Why does the Federal Government require job applicants to complete its own, painfully long and detailed application form?" and "Why doesn't the Federal Government just accept résumés instead?" Now, the Federal Government does accept résumés—sort of. USAJOBS invites you to upload a résumé and makes no mention of the mostly-forgotten SF-171, "Application for Federal Employment."

As discussed in various MSPB publications, that step may have done less to revolutionize Federal hiring—in ease of application, time to hire, or quality of hire—than proponents might have hoped. Observers of Federal HR can easily think of other reforms that seem to have underperformed. But this column does not argue against change or evaluate the merits of any particular reform or initiative. Instead, it outlines some steps that might help in identifying useful changes and increasing their likelihood of success.

**Look broadly and closely.** Be wary of assuming that all organizations use a particular practice. They might not. The idea behind strategic HR management is that policies and practices are aligned with an organization's goals and workforce—think tailored rather than "one size fits all." Seek information on how well the practice really works and what makes that practice work. Using the example of résumés as employment applications—what happens next? How are applicants screened and referred? How free are the HR specialists and hiring managers to decide which résumés to review? What competencies are assessed, and what assessments are used?

**Think it through.** If the change still looks promising, consider how it would work in the Federal space. Is it compatible with existing policies and business processes, or must those change too? What are the effects on stakeholders such as employees, managers, citizens, and contractors? To what extent is the change technical, cultural, or both? Changing minds isn't enough if a change in policy is needed. The reverse holds too. For example, OPM guidance has clearly stated for some time that subject matter experts (SMEs) can play a substantive role in screening candidates. But the belief that SMEs cannot or should not be involved at that stage has proved remarkably persistent in some organizations.

**Start small and experiment.** It may be impossible to anticipate every obstacle or persuade every stakeholder. Piloting a change on a small scale, with collaborators who are open to change and prepared to learn from failure, may be the best (or only) way forward. The hiring changes piloted by the U.S. Digital Service that we highlighted in our January 2020 *Issues of Merit* are excellent examples. The proponents did not attempt a "big bang" reform of Federal hiring in all agencies or for all occupations. Instead, they focused on a local problem and arrived at local solutions that could be applicable in many corners of Government.

**Stay around and persist.** Almost any change will encounter resistance or setbacks. That doesn't mean that one should simply resign oneself to working harder rather than smarter. But it does suggest that an advocate of change should remain engaged after the change is announced. That way, the advocate can see what happens and help work through the issues that arise.

The good news for Federal employees who want to be change agents is that there are many good opportunities for change and that change is possible. The reality check is that there's no substitute for critical thinking and hard work. ❖



Acting Director, Policy and Evaluation

# Thinking About Performance Ratings

*As agencies enter the performance appraisal season, here is a look at common motivations supervisors have for employee ratings.*

“What are they thinking?” is a common reaction when a supervisor does something unexpected. Deeper concerns may accompany this thought in relation to a supervisor’s ratings of their team’s performance. Motivated by such concerns, researchers at Wayne State University studied supervisors’ motivations to rate employees as they prepare for performance appraisals.<sup>1</sup> Their findings help us understand what supervisors may be thinking.

For performance ratings to work as intended, agencies must take steps to ensure that supervisors deliver ratings that reflect only the proper motivations. Decisions that take ratings into consideration (such as awards and promotions) will not be merit-based or credible if supervisors are unwilling to provide accurate feedback or if they prepare ratings intended to achieve particular results without regard to performance (such as rewarding a favorite or punishing a disfavored employee).

The researchers found that the following five factors commonly affect how supervisors rate performance:

1. *Accuracy*: Accurately rate performance-related behaviors and contributions.
2. *Improvement*: Identify opportunities to improve employee performance.
3. *Encouragement*: Identify positive aspects of employee performance to encourage future performance.
4. *Avoidance*: Avoid contentious or difficult interpersonal interactions.
5. *System Gaming*: Manipulate ratings to achieve positive self-outcomes such as improved perceptions of the rater or additional resources for the organization.

Most would agree that three of those factors—*accuracy*, *improvement*, and *encouragement*—are appropriate. The remaining two, *avoidance* and *system gaming*, are not. Results showed that supervisors who had *avoidance* and *system gaming* motives in assigning ratings also tended to have darker personality traits such as manipulateness. On the other hand, supervisors who had *accuracy*, *improvement*, and *encouragement* rating motives tended to be more conscientious and agreeable.

What does this mean? Researchers found that supervisors with constructive motivations are more likely to be good raters—and more effective supervisors generally. Specifically, such supervisors put more effort into preparing for performance appraisals, believed they had produced fair ratings, and were more satisfied with the effects of the appraisal on their employees. They also scored higher on a measure of preference to work in a merit-based environment—suggesting that they are more likely to remain and succeed in an organization like the Federal Government, which aspires to create fair and accurate performance management systems.<sup>2</sup>

The length of time in a supervisory role or how much performance appraisal training supervisors received made little difference in the supervisors’ appraisal motive. The researchers reviewed rating training practices and noted that although there is typically discussion of *accuracy*, *improvement*, and *encouragement* in this training, issues of *avoidance* and *system gaming* are rarely addressed. They speculate that this omission allows more manipulative supervisors to believe their machinations are unobserved with no expectations of accountability.

What are the implications for practice? The research points to several steps agencies can take to promote fair and accurate performance ratings:

- **Training.** Training on performance appraisal should address not only the how (such as how to develop standards, measure performance, and prepare ratings) but the why. As the researchers suggest, training should openly discuss all five motivations, both positive and negative. This could help supervisors recognize and counteract problematic

<sup>1</sup> Speer, A. B., Tenbrink, A. P. & Schwendeman, M. G. (2020). Creation and validation of the Performance Appraisal Motivation Scale (PAMS). *Human Performance*, 33(2-3), 214-240.

<sup>2</sup> Davey, L. M., Bobocel, D. R., Hing, L. S. S. & Zanna, M. P. (1999). Preference for the Merit Principle Scale: An individual difference measure of distributive justice preferences. *Social Justice Research*, 12, 223–240.

(continued from previous page)

motives such as *avoidance*. It also clarifies the agency’s expectations and communicates that higher-level managers are not naive, even if their usual approach is to delegate and trust.

- **Supervisor selection.** Training can improve the skills and instincts of supervisors who are conscientious and want to use their authority properly. But even well-designed training is not likely to make an unethical, manipulative supervisor ethical or trusting. So, agencies that want supervisors to be good raters should ensure that their programs for recruiting and selecting supervisors assess, to the extent practical, foundational competencies such as conscientiousness. MSPB’s report *Making the Right Connections: Targeting the Best Competencies for Training* contains an extended discussion of competency trainability.
- **Monitoring.** Agencies can reinforce selection and training procedures by monitoring the health of their performance appraisal system. Both clarity and accountability are encouraged when supervisors document and discuss reasons for their ratings with their own supervisors. Analysis of agencywide rating patterns combined with periodic workforce climate surveys can provide additional insights about rating patterns and departures from them. ❖



## Non-Critical Performance Elements: The Value in a Non-Critical Task

*Non-critical elements can broaden “performance” by measuring desired tasks.*

According to Federal employee appraisal data, less than 1 percent of employees fail to perform adequately in a critical element. A critical element is one for which unacceptable performance in the task means unacceptable performance in the job as a whole. However, there may be aspects of performance that, while not crucial, can nevertheless add to the quality or timeliness of the organization’s work. How can an agency measure and reward these nice-to-have aspects? That’s where the non-critical elements come into play.

Non-critical elements may include, but are not limited to, objectives, goals, program plans, work plans, and other means of expressing expected performance. Under 5 CFR § 430.208(b), agencies are permitted to include in their appraisal systems non-critical elements for ratings at a higher level. In other words, a person cannot be rated “unacceptable” based on a non-critical element. However, the difference between fully successful and outstanding can be how a person performed in these nice-to-have aspects.

For example, a supervisor might say, “I don’t want to remove my experienced employee for choosing not to spend time away from production to mentor new employees, but I’d really like to encourage and reward her if she does mentor others because it’s a good long-term investment.” This mentoring could become a non-critical element. If the employee does not do it, she is fully successful. If she does it and performs well, that can constitute outstanding performance.

Some work may not lend itself to non-critical tasks. There, the work is everything that needs to get done and there is nothing optional about it. However, for those organizations where there may be space for optional tasks, the non-critical element can be a way to measure and provide rewards for them. It is one more tool that agencies can give to supervisors for more constructive performance management. ❖

# Building Supportive Work Environments

*Supervisors may help improve outcomes by increasing camaraderie.*

MSPB's 2008 report *The Power of Employee Engagement* demonstrates that a connection to people—coworkers in particular—can help create or sustain employee engagement. Research suggests that a collegial, supportive work environment has other benefits, as well. Notably, it may buffer work-related stress and emotional fatigue, which can contribute to reduced performance and increased turnover.<sup>1</sup> A supportive environment may also be less prone to aggressive behaviors, ranging from ordinary rudeness to open violations of workplace norms and rules.<sup>2</sup> But maintaining connection and camaraderie may be harder in a time of physical and social distancing. So, what can be done?

Analysis of data from MSPB's 2016 Merit Principles Survey (MPS) suggests that there are two ways supervisors can promote such an environment.<sup>3</sup> The first and most obvious way is to treat employees with civility and respect. The second is to encourage positive relationships among employees, especially within the work unit. The analysis goes on to suggest that such relationships may help employees better deal with ineffective supervision—although a better strategy is to prevent poor supervision through careful selection and development. Some suggestions for improving workplace cohesion and social support include the following:<sup>4</sup>

- Train staff in people management skills. Work and work relationships can be challenging. Strengthening listening and communication skills can help employees feel “heard” and discuss work matters honestly and constructively.
- Be cautious about creating goals and incentives that encourage employees to compete rather than cooperate. Shared goals and incentives may promote more collaboration and, over time, higher organizational performance.
- Make work roles and responsibilities clear to the extent practical. Clarity helps prevent “my job versus your job” conflicts, such as disagreements over work assignments and accountability.
- Reward and recognize team performance, but base recognition on team members' contributions to goal accomplishment and good team dynamics.
- Invest in onboarding. Effective programs—with features such as mentoring, check-ins, and oversight—can help new employees feel both welcome and productive.
- Monitor work unit turnover and climate measures (such as employee survey results) that may be indicators of workplace stress and work unit cohesion difficulty. Although turnover is a lagging and imperfect indicator, sudden changes may signal workplace distress. Leaders may also capitalize on perennial measures such as the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey to more routinely gauge workplace stress.
- Encourage informal and inclusive socializing to help employees better understand others' interests, skills, and work styles. Activities that are low-key and less-planned may be more welcome (and effective) than elaborate team building exercises or obligatory social events.

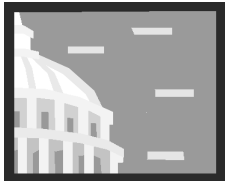
In closing, most work and workplaces involve elements of stress and emotional labor. The good news is that support from coworkers and a collegial workplace can make such challenges more manageable, and leaders can take positive actions in that direction. ❖

<sup>1</sup> Cohen, S. & Wills, T. A. (1985). Stress, social support, and the buffering hypothesis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 98(2), 310–357.

<sup>2</sup> Cortina, L. M., Kabat-Farr, D., Leskinen, E. A., Huerta, M. & Magley, V. J. (2013). Selective incivility as modern discrimination in organizations: Evidence and impact. *Journal of Management*, 39(6), 1579–1605. And Rahim, A. & Cosby, D. M. (2016). A model of workplace incivility, job burnout, turnover intentions, and job performance. *Journal of Management Development*, 35(10), 1255–1265.

<sup>3</sup> This analysis evaluated the relationships among survey items on topics such as coworker support, emotional labor and exhaustion, and intention to leave, using techniques such as structural equation modeling and decision tree analysis.

<sup>4</sup> Shoobridge, G. (2021). Foster camaraderie to build a great place to work. Available at <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/foster-camaraderie-build-great-place-work-gonzalo-shoobridge-ph-d/>. Additional resources related to these strategies include the following: Pollack J., Matous P. (2019). Testing the impact of targeted team building on project team communication using social network analysis. *Journal of International Project Management*, 37, 473–484; Locke, E. A. & Latham, G. P. (2002). Building a practically useful theory of goal setting and task motivation: A 35 year odyssey. *American Psychologist*, 57, 9, 705–717; Klein, C., DiazGranados, D., Salas, E., Le, H., Burke, C. S., Lyons, R. & Goodwin, G. F. (2009). Does team building work? *Small Group Research*, 40, 181–222; Pearsall, M. J., Christian, M. S. & Ellis, A. P. J. (2010). Motivating interdependent teams: Individual rewards, shared rewards, or something in between? *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 95, 1, 183–191; Ashforth, B. E., Sluss, D. M. & Harrison, S. H. (2007). Socialization in organizational contexts. *International Review of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 22, 1–70. England, UK: John Wiley & Sons Ltd; Falletta, S. V. & Combs, W. L. (2001). Surveys as a tool for organization development and change. *Organization development: Data driven methods for change*, 78–102. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass—SOP Professional Practice Series; Deane F.P., Gourney K. Chapter 1. Leading a multidisciplinary team. Available from: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242558033>.



## Agency Corner: Workforce Recruitment Program

The Federal Government faces many challenges in recruiting and hiring a high-quality workforce, including recruiting qualified applicants quickly. The Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy and the Department of Defense jointly manage a Governmentwide program that may be able to help. The Workforce Recruitment Program (WRP) is a free, online recruitment and referral resource that helps connect Federal hiring managers with qualified candidates who are eligible to be hired using the Schedule A hiring authority for persons with disabilities (5 CFR § 213.3102(u)). The WRP provides agencies a source of qualified candidates from a variety of backgrounds who can fill open positions noncompetitively using the Schedule A authority, which does not require posting job announcements publicly.

Candidates in the WRP database represent a wide range of academic and professional backgrounds. They include persons with disabilities who are undergraduate students, graduate students, or recent graduates and are available for internships, part-time positions, and full-time positions nationwide. All recent graduates have graduated within approximately the last 2 ½ years. The WRP database has résumés from more than 2,500 students and recent graduates from almost 400 accredited institutions. There is also a large number of veterans.

**Participants:** Participating schools must be U.S. postsecondary institutions that are accredited by one of the U.S. Department of Education-recognized agencies. School coordinators register their schools for WRP participation each spring and market the program to candidates. Students and recent graduates register in the fall and are confirmed for participation by the school coordinators. The students then submit an online application, résumé, and transcript and attest that they are U.S. citizens and eligible for the Schedule A hiring authority for persons with disabilities, making WRP one of the largest Schedule A hiring resources. Some candidates may be eligible for other hiring authorities, such as Pathways and veterans' authorities, but agencies must follow the hiring rules for those authorities. Hiring managers and HR staff register with the WRP and can immediately start searching the database to identify candidates who have the skills for which they are hiring.

**How to Search:** To search for candidates, hiring managers and HR staff go to [www.wrp.gov](http://www.wrp.gov) and click on the employer registration button. Anyone with a Government email address can register. WRP recommends that each hiring manager and HR staff member establish individual accounts, making it easier to save and track the results of candidate searches. When hiring managers and HR staff receive their login information, they can go to the "Employer" menu and select "Search Student Applications." Users can streamline their searches for candidates by sorting and filtering candidates by characteristics such as school major, location, technical skills, keywords, and job focus. Relevant candidate information can also be saved for later use. The database is available year round and is renewed with a fresh set of candidates each December. Also, candidates are able to update their information throughout the year.

**Hiring Process:** While the online resource provides access to interested candidates, the agency is still responsible for managing the hiring process in line with Federal requirements. Hiring managers, in consultation with their HR staff, must identify the competencies and qualifications needed for jobs, screen applicants, contact the candidates directly for interviews or other assessments, confirm that successful candidates meet job qualifications, verify documentation that candidates are eligible for the Schedule A hiring authority, and make final job offers. Once an offer is made, the hiring manager notes it in the database so WRP can track program results. The agency is responsible for all accompanying new-hire obligations, including onboarding, compensation and benefits, and training.

Disability is a dimension of diversity and inclusion, and individuals with disabilities bring a variety of skills and abilities to the workplace. OPM has designated WRP as a model hiring strategy, indicating that the program supports compliance with Section 501 on disability hiring requirements and can be a valuable tool to help agencies hire a high-quality workforce in a timely manner. For more information about the program, go to [www.wrp.gov](http://www.wrp.gov). ❖

The content of this article was written by MSPB and based largely on information provided during the WRP February 2021 Federal Employer Webinar.



FIRST CLASS MAIL  
POSTAGE & FEES PAID  
MSPB 20419  
PERMIT NO. G-113

U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board  
1615 M Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20419

# ISSUES OF MERIT

September 2021

Volume 26 Issue 3

IN THIS ISSUE \* IN THIS ISSUE \* IN THIS ISSUE

**Post-Pandemic Telework.** *What should agencies consider when developing plans for re-entry, and beyond? (Page 1)*



**Director's Column.** *How employees can be effective change agents. (Page 3)*

**Performance Appraisal Motivations.** *What are supervisors thinking when they prepare employee evaluations? (Page 4)*



**Non-Critical Elements.** *Measuring and rewarding desired tasks. (Page 5)*

**Building Camaraderie.** *How supervisors may improve outcomes by increasing camaraderie. (Page 6)*

**Workforce Recruitment Program.** *A Governmentwide resource for matching qualified individuals with disabilities to Federal jobs. (Page 7)*

