

CLASSIFIED

# In Search of Highly Skilled Workers

## *A Study on the Hiring of Upper Level Employees From Outside the Federal Government*

Department of Veterans Affairs  
Research & Development Office

A Report to the President and the Congress of the United States by the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board



**WANTED**  
Ambitious Federal Managers and Executives

**JOB REQUIREMENTS:**

- Keep up-to-date on the latest developments affecting federal managers
- Stay informed on advances and innovations of agencies and commercial competitors
- Must be knowledgeable about professional career development and benefit issues
- Understand the impact a variety of information technologies

THE CHAIRMAN



U.S. MERIT SYSTEMS PROTECTION BOARD  
1615 M Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20419-0001

February 2008

The President  
President of the Senate  
Speaker of the House of Representatives

Dear Sirs and Madam:

In accordance with the requirements of 5 U.S.C. 1204(a)(3), it is my honor to submit this U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) report, "In Search of Highly Skilled Workers: A Study on the Hiring of Upper Level Employees from Outside the Federal Government." This report presents the findings of a study the MSPB conducted on the hiring of new employees at the upper level grades 12, 13, 14 and 15 in the General Schedule (GS) or similar pay plans in fiscal year 2005.

Each year, the Government hires tens of thousands of new employees. Traditionally, the vast majority of these new employees were appointed at grades GS-11 and below. However, the number of new hires at grades GS-12 and above has been increasing, especially since FY 2000. This trend is likely to continue as more employees retire, many of whom must be replaced to ensure that the Government has the expertise it needs to achieve its missions. In addition, as the needs of the American people become more complex, new programs often require the influx of new expertise at higher levels in the organization.

As the senior or journeyman-level specialists, analysts, supervisors and managers, these new upper level employees have critical roles in the effective and efficient operation of the Government. MSPB studied this group of new employees to determine whether the Government is hiring the best applicants for these jobs in accord with the merit system principles and to find ways to improve the hiring of these highly skilled and experienced personnel.

I believe that you will find this report useful as you consider issues regarding the future of the Federal civil service.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "Neil A. G. McPhie".

Neil A. G. McPhie

# **In Search of Highly Skilled Workers**

*A Study on the Hiring of  
Upper Level Employees From  
Outside the Federal Government*



**A Report to the President and the Congress  
of the United States by the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board**

# **U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board**

**Neil A. G. McPhie**, *Chairman*

**Mary M. Rose**, *Vice Chairman*

**Barbara J. Sapin**, *Member*

## **Office of Policy and Evaluation**

*Acting Director*

**John Crum, Ph.D.**

*Project Manager*

**Ligaya J. Fernandez**

*Project Analyst*

**James Tsugawa**

# Attracting and Hiring New Employees in the Federal Government: A Series

This report is part of a three-study series that explores how the Federal Government attracts and hires new employees. The purpose of the series is to identify potential improvements to recruiting and selecting applicants from all segments of society based on relative ability after fair and open competition, as prescribed by the merit system principles. Specifically, the series addresses the following topics:

**Attracting entry-level employees.** Many fear that the Federal Government is facing a “brain drain” as the result of an aging workforce and high retirement eligibility rates. Using input from new entry-level employees about why they chose to work for the Federal Government and what obstacles they faced in the job search, this study assesses how agencies can better attract and select qualified applicants for entry-level opportunities to build a sufficient pipeline for journey-level positions.

**Attracting upper level employees.** Employees at the upper level grades in Government are critical to the efficient and effective operation of Government programs. They are the senior level specialists, analysts, and managers who develop, implement, and carry out Government- or agency-wide policies and programs. This study explores how agencies hire highly skilled or experienced workers from outside the Government and how agencies can improve these hiring practices.

**Agencies’ use of hiring authorities.** As more hiring authorities become available to agencies, the use of competitive examining through the U.S. Office of Personnel Management or a Delegated Examining Unit is decreasing. In response to this trend, this study examines the extent to which certain hiring authorities are being used, how they are used, and how well supervisors understand the responsibilities and consequences that come with their decision to use a particular authority.

# Table of Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	i
<b>Introduction</b> .....	1
Purpose and Focus of the Study .....	1
Scope and Methodology .....	2
<b>Why Supervisors Hire From Outside</b> .....	5
<b>Who Were the Upper Level New Hires</b> .....	9
Average Age .....	11
Educational Attainment .....	12
Supervisory Level .....	12
Work Background .....	13
Women and Minorities .....	14
<b>How They Were Hired</b> .....	19
Excepted Service Hiring .....	19
Competitive Service Hiring .....	20
Competitive Examining .....	20
Direct Hire .....	21
Veterans Hiring .....	22
Achieving a Representative Workforce .....	24
<b>How They Learned About Job Vacancies</b> .....	27
<b>Why They Applied for Their Jobs</b> .....	29
Reasons for Applying for Federal Jobs .....	30
Job Security .....	30
Mission of Agency and Public Service .....	30
Desire to Fully Utilize Talents and Have a Better Job .....	31
Government’s Benefits and Pay .....	32
Strengths of Federal Employment .....	32
Recruitment Incentives .....	34
The Importance of Knowing Applicants’ Motivations .....	35

**How They Were Assessed** .....37

    Meeting Minimum Qualification Requirements.....37

        Evaluating Applicants for Minimum Qualifications.....38

        Using Selective Factors .....38

    HR Staff Expertise and Managers’ Involvement.....40

**Barriers and Challenges Encountered by Supervisors  
and New Hires** .....43

    Length of the Hiring Process.....43

    Complexity of the Application Process.....46

**Conclusions and Recommendations** .....49

**Appendix. PATCOB Definitions** .....53

# Executive Summary

**T**his report presents the findings of a study on the hiring of new employees from outside the Federal Government at the upper level grades 12, 13, 14 and 15 in the General Schedule (GS) or similar pay plans in fiscal year 2005. As the senior or journeyman-level specialists, analysts, supervisors and managers, these new upper level employees have critical roles in the effective and efficient operation of the Government. The U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) studied this group of new employees to determine whether the Government is hiring the best applicants for these jobs in accordance with the merit system principles. MSPB also conducted this study to identify how best to attract highly skilled workers in a competitive labor market and to determine whether there were barriers to bringing in external applicants at the upper level grades.

Each year, the Government hires tens of thousands of new employees. Traditionally, these new employees were appointed at grades GS-11 and below. However, the number of new hires at the upper level grades has trended upward since fiscal year (FY) 1990 and especially since FY 2000. This trend is likely to continue as more employees retire, many of whom must be replaced to ensure that the Government has the expertise it needs to achieve its missions. In addition, as the needs of the American people become more complex, new programs have to be staffed and/or expertise in a new field or specialty must be acquired.

Since most of the upper level new hires were appointed to professional and administrative positions—positions that require the exercise of a high degree of discretion, judgment, and personal responsibility—this study is limited to these categories of employees. To complete the study, MSPB examined aggregate, Governmentwide personnel data for upper level new hires over the 16-year period, fiscal years 1990-2005. We also surveyed a random sample of new upper level employees hired in FY 2005 and their supervisors to learn more about their views and experiences with the Government's hiring process.

This study of the hiring process for upper level new employees focused on the following issues:

- Why did selecting supervisors choose to hire from outside the Government at upper level grades instead of selecting from within? And, why did they hire at the upper level instead of at entry-level grades?



- Who were the upper level new hires? What factors influenced their hiring?
- What attracted these new hires to Federal service? Can the Government compete for highly skilled workers in a competitive labor market? If so, how?
- What were the barriers, if any, to hiring external applicants (i.e., persons outside the Government) at upper levels?

Another purpose of this study was to determine whether the hiring of new upper level employees was in accordance with the first merit system principle, which requires that (a) competition for Federal jobs be fair and open, (b) selection be based solely on merit, and (c) the Federal workforce be reflective of the public it serves. The report discusses the study findings and where appropriate, suggests steps to improve the hiring process and help ensure that the Government hires the right people for the right job.

The study's main findings include the following:

***Since FY 1990, the number of new upper level employees hired has steadily increased.***

In FY 2005, the Government hired more than 12,000 new upper level employees. This number is 39 percent more than the 8,600 new upper level employees hired in FY 1990—the year preceding the downsizing and restructuring that occurred in the 1990s.

***The Government's hiring pattern largely follows its overall priorities.***

Homeland security, national defense, and the need to deliver services to the American public through the use of technology were three of the many Government priorities in FY 2005. These priorities were mirrored in who was hired in the Government, the types of upper level positions filled, and the agencies that did most of the hiring.

- Eighty percent of the new upper level employees were hired by 10 agencies, with the Department of Defense (DoD) and its major components (i.e., Air Force, Army, Navy and Marines) accounting for about half (47 percent) of the new hires. However, the hiring of new upper level employees did not occur equally across a department or agency. Rather, this hiring was concentrated in a few subordinate agencies of a department, or in a certain office or division of an agency, with responsibility to carry out priority programs.
- Although the new hires were appointed in 219 occupations, more than half (53 percent) were appointed in only 10 occupations. Many of the occupations support homeland security and national defense. Nevertheless, the number one occupation filled was information technology management, which is common to virtually all agencies.

- Many of the new hires had Government-related experience, which was gained either as employees of Federal contractors or members of the military service. Former employees of Federal contractors and former military members comprised almost half (48 percent) of FY 2005's upper level new hires.

### ***The hiring processes agencies used influenced who was hired.***

- Although agencies relied on USAJOBS to advertise job vacancies, this was not the survey respondents' primary source of job information. More new hires relied on their network of friends, their relatives, and their new Federal supervisors and co-workers to learn about job opportunities. Word of mouth is effective not only for some applicants, but also for agencies trying to find high-quality applicants. However, this approach has a limited reach and cannot be relied upon to ensure a diverse applicant pool.
- Assessment methods were sometimes used that unnecessarily limited who can qualify for vacant jobs. To ensure they get the person they believe is right for the job, agencies sometimes restrict competition through the use of selective factors. Although selective factors can ensure that only those with the right qualifications are hired for the job, they can also limit the pool of applicants who can qualify and, ultimately, the number of applicants referred for selection. Furthermore, agencies sometimes use selective factors inappropriately. Selective factors that are too restrictive can act as artificial barriers to open competition, eliminating qualified applicants from further consideration.
- The use of competitive examining—the traditional method of filling competitive service jobs—decreased from 64 percent in FY 1999 to 39 percent in FY 2005 for hiring new upper level employees. This decrease corresponded with the implementation of the Veterans Employment Opportunity Act of 1998. Since its implementation in FY 2000, hiring of new upper level employees under the Act increased from 6 percent of all the Government's new upper level employees to 26 percent in FY 2005. The proportion of former military members hired under the Act has had considerable influence on the composition of the upper level new hires.

### ***The upper level new hires tended to be nonminority males.***

Overall, the percentage of women and minorities in upper level professional and administrative occupations increased over fiscal years 1990-2005. However, a vast majority of the upper level new hires were nonminority males. Various factors have affected the composition of upper level new hires. These include the types of upper level positions the Government has filled, as dictated by the Government's priorities and missions. Many of these positions are typically male-dominated. Another factor is the hiring authorities agencies used to appoint new employees. For example, there has been a significant increase in the hiring of former military members through the Veterans Employment Opportunity Act. An overwhelming

majority of upper level new hires hired under the Act were nonminority males. This is not an indictment of this special program meant to hire veterans because it serves an important purpose, but a significant factor that agencies need to address in their strategic recruitment plans.

***The upper level new hires were highly educated.***

Seventy-five percent of the upper level new hires had at least a bachelor's degree. The higher the grade the larger the proportion of new hires with at least a bachelor's degree—93 percent of the GS-15s held at least a bachelor's degree compared with 83 percent of the GS-14s, 76 percent of the GS-13s, and 66 percent of the GS-12s.

***Job security was the most common reason upper level new hires applied for their Federal jobs.***

Of a list of 16 possible reasons respondents were offered, by far the most common reason new hires applied for their upper level jobs was job security, selected by about half of them. The mission of the agency and the opportunity to serve the public were also popular reasons. Other frequently cited reasons included the desire to fully utilize their talents and find a better job.

***Generally, upper level new hires hold favorable views of their agencies.***

When asked to compare their agency to their last employer in 17 discrete areas, the new hires rated their new agency better, not worse, in almost all areas except in dealing effectively with poor performers. For example, they viewed their agency's workplace flexibilities, such as telework and alternative work schedule, as better. They also perceived their agency as a place where people can find more challenging work and better opportunities for training and development. Agencies were also viewed as having better ethical practices and as being better at providing opportunities to make a difference.

***The Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) television campaign has had some positive impact.***

OPM ran a television recruitment campaign in its attempt to make more people aware of USAJOBS, the Government's central repository of vacancy announcements, and of the many exciting and rewarding careers available in the Federal Government. The ads have appeared in various strategic areas across the country. The campaign appears to be a move in the right direction. OPM has noted an increase in the number of visits to its USAJOBS Web site from people in the areas where the ad appeared. However, we note that agencies must also do their part to make this campaign truly successful. In particular, agencies need to issue vacancy announcements that are engaging, concise, and clear. Potential applicants can be turned off when vacancy announcements are too lengthy or poorly written, problems that occur all too often.

### ***Selecting supervisors and new hires experienced challenges and barriers during the hiring process.***

- Supervisors and upper level new employees believed that the hiring process was too complex and took too long.
- About a third of the new hires did not apply for other Federal jobs they were interested in because they would have had to write new essays or revise their existing essays describing their knowledge, skills and abilities; while about a fourth did not apply because they would have needed to rewrite or reformat their résumé.
- Finding someone with the right technical experience was the number one challenge supervisors faced when hiring at the upper level grades. Even so, some human resources specialists apparently employed a passive approach to recruiting for upper level jobs, given that more than half of the upper level new hires said they were not informed of the status of their applications until being called for interviews or offered their jobs.

To improve the hiring of upper level new employees and ensure that the civil service maintains a highly qualified diverse workforce, we offer the following recommendations.

#### ***Agencies should:***

1. Develop a hiring strategy to fill upper level jobs that uses a comprehensive recruiting plan that—
  - Does not limit public notice to USAJOBS. Recruitment efforts should include other announcement and publicity tools to attract a diverse pool of qualified applicants with the skills and expertise agencies need.
  - Does more to highlight their missions in vacancy announcements and ads to appeal to potential applicants who have the passion and personal commitment to their agencies' missions.
  - Includes job marketing programs that emphasize positives that are important to people whom they want to attract. For example, many of the new hires indicated that they would have accepted their job offers even with a reduction in pay because of the Government's workplace flexibilities and benefits package, so these should be stressed.
  - Includes well written vacancy announcements.
2. Improve their assessment methods by—
  - Avoiding the use of restrictive selective factors that do not enhance minimum qualification requirements to screen applicants.

- Ensuring that automated questionnaires are not so long that they become burdensome, defeating the purpose of “automation.” Agencies should also ensure the accuracy of online assessment ratings by at least verifying the lack of qualifications of those who were rated unqualified and/or verifying the quality of the experience of those candidates who may be referred for selection before giving a certified list of candidates to the selecting supervisor.
3. Involve the supervisor (or other selecting officials) in the pre-selection phases of the hiring process—determining the hiring authorities or methods to be used, recruiting, developing assessment tools, and assessing qualifications.
  4. Continuously review their application process and eliminate steps that do not add value. Agencies should endeavor to review applications and assess qualifications in a timely manner to minimize the time applicants have to wait for hiring decisions.
  5. Ensure that the human resources staffs responsible for recruiting applicants for upper level positions provide meaningful feedback to job applicants. Feedback, which puts some personal touch to an impersonal process, can help maintain applicants’ interest throughout a hiring process that can be lengthy at times.

# Introduction

This report examines Federal agencies' hiring of highly skilled and experienced workers from outside the Federal Government.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, this report focuses on the hiring of new employees at the upper level grades 12, 13, 14 and 15 in the General Schedule (GS) and GS-equivalent pay plans.<sup>2</sup> The U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board studied the hiring of these new employees because they are the senior or journeyman-level specialists, analysts, supervisors and managers who develop, implement and manage Government- or agency-wide policies and programs.<sup>3</sup> As such, they are critical to the efficient and effective operation of the Government.

## Purpose and Focus of the Study

MSPB conducted this study as part of its statutory mandate to report to the President and Congress on whether Federal agencies are protecting the public interest in a merit-based Federal civil service.<sup>4</sup> This study is designed to find ways to improve the hiring of highly skilled and experienced personnel for upper level jobs. Our examination of the hiring of upper level new employees focused on the following issues:

- Why did selecting supervisors choose to hire from outside the Government at upper level grades instead of selecting from within?
- Why did selecting supervisors choose to hire at upper level grades instead of at lower level grades?
- Who were the upper level new hires? What factors influenced their hiring?

---

<sup>1</sup> Applicants from outside the Federal Government are commonly referred to as “external” applicants.

<sup>2</sup> In the early 1970s, nearly all white-collar Federal employees were governed by the GS pay plan, which is divided into 15 grades. Since then, many new pay plans have been created, some of which are similar to the GS in structure. In FY 2005, 74 percent of all full-time permanent new hires were in the GS or in GS-equivalent pay plans. For this study, “upper level” collectively denotes grades 12, 13, 14 and 15 in the GS or GS-equivalent pay plans.

<sup>3</sup> In this report, the terms “new employees” and “new hires” are used interchangeably to denote employees who joined the civil service for the first time.

<sup>4</sup> 5 U.S.C. § 1204(a)(3).

- What attracted these new hires to Federal service? Can the Government compete for highly skilled workers in a competitive labor market? If so, how?
- What were the barriers, if any, to hiring external applicants at upper level grades?

Another purpose of this study was to determine whether the hiring of new upper level employees was in accord with the first merit system principle, which requires that (a) competition for Federal jobs be fair and open, (b) selection be based solely on merit, and (c) the Federal workforce be reflective of the public it serves.

## Scope and Methodology

This study covers the hiring of new upper level employees into permanent full-time positions in the competitive and excepted service.<sup>5</sup> For this study, “new hires” do not include employees who transferred between agencies or converted from one service to another (for example, from excepted to competitive service and vice versa). **Table 1** shows that most employees at the upper level grades are in either the professional or the administrative occupations.<sup>6</sup> For this reason, this study is limited to these categories of employees.

Grade	Occupational Category		
	Professional	Administrative	All other
GS 12	35	62	3
GS 13	37	59	4
GS 14	43	57	—
GS 15	71	29	—

Source: OPM, Central Personnel Data File.

<sup>5</sup> The executive branch of Government is composed of the competitive service, the excepted service and the Senior Executive Service. Most positions in the executive branch are in the competitive civil service, where positions are typically filled through competitive examining procedures controlled by OPM. Some positions—and even all positions in some agencies—are specifically excepted from the competitive service by statute, the President, or OPM. The competitive examining procedures are not used to fill excepted service jobs. The Senior Executive Service is not included in this study.

<sup>6</sup> Federal jobs are classified into six broad occupational categories, five of which are in white-collar occupations; i.e., professional (P), administrative (A), technical (T), clerical (C) and other white-collar (O) positions. The sixth category captures all blue-collar (B) occupations. These occupational categories are commonly known as PATCOB. See the appendix for brief definitions of the PATCOB categories.

This study relied heavily on the following sources of information:

- 1. Office of Personnel Management's Central Personnel Data File (CPDF).<sup>7</sup>** The CPDF is a database that contains personnel information on Federal nonpostal civilian employees in the executive branch of the Government. We used the CPDF to examine aggregate, Government-wide data about the upper level employees over a period of 16 years (fiscal years 1990-2005), with special focus on FY 2005. Data gathered were the number of new employees hired, their demographics, the agencies that hired them, and the appointment authorities used.
- 2. Surveys of new hires and their supervisors.<sup>8</sup>** The first survey was sent to a random sample of 1,815 upper level new hires across the Government who started working for the civil service in FY 2005. The sample was composed of 1,000 nonsupervisory and 815 supervisory new hires and included only nonseasonal, full-time permanent employees. The second survey was sent to the supervisors of these new hires. Fifty percent of the new hires and 47 percent of the supervisors that we contacted returned their surveys. The surveys were paper-based and were conducted during February and June 2006. Participation in the surveys was voluntary and responses were confidential. To ensure confidentiality, we report only aggregate data.

The new employees' views and experiences discussed in this report are those of individuals hired in FY 2005. Because who gets hired in any given year is influenced by a variety of factors (such as the Government's program priorities and the hiring process used), it is possible that individuals hired in one year will have different experiences and views from those of individuals hired in another year.

---

<sup>7</sup>The CPDF includes data on employees in the executive branch except in agencies exempt from personnel reporting requirements; e.g., the Postal Service and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

<sup>8</sup>To obtain a copy of the surveys, call (202) 653-6772, ext. 1350; send an e-mail to [studies@mspb.gov](mailto:studies@mspb.gov); or send a letter to the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, Office of Policy and Evaluation, Washington, DC, 20419.

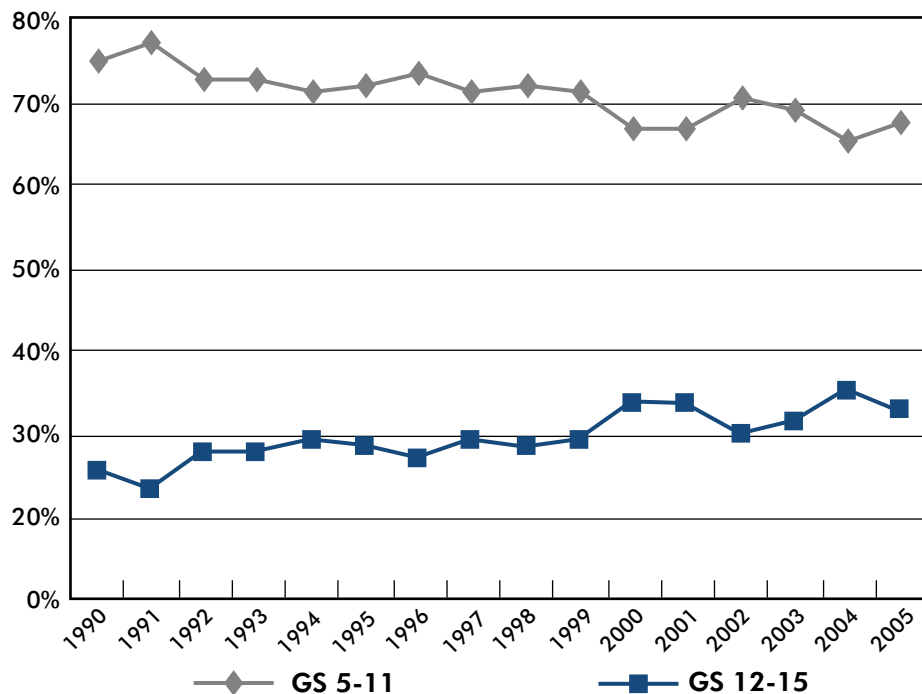




# Why Supervisors Hire From Outside

Each year, the Federal Government fills a substantial number of professional and administrative positions with new employees. For example, in FY 2005, the Government hired more than 41,000 new employees in professional and administrative positions at various grade levels. Traditionally, most of the new hires were appointed at the GS-11 and below, a hiring practice that has tended to decline over the last 16 years, as **Figure 1** shows.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, Figure 1 also shows that the hiring of new employees at the upper level grades has steadily increased, from about 25 percent in FY 1990 to 33 percent in FY 2005.

**Figure 1. Percent of Professional and Administrative Full-Time Permanent New Hires by Grade Levels, FY 1990-FY 2005**



Source: OPM, Central Personnel Data File.

<sup>9</sup> For a more detailed discussion on entry level hiring, see MSPB's report *Attracting the Next Generation: A Look at Federal Entry Level New Hires*, Washington, DC, February 2008.

Some professional and administrative occupations have a full-performance or journeyman level that starts at GS-12 or above. However, GS-9 normally represents the first full-performance level for professional and administrative occupations. Thus, many professional and administrative new employees at GS-9 or -11 may already have been hired at their full-performance level. Many of these lower graded employees are interested in moving up in their careers and are likely to seek promotion to upper level positions. To do so, they have to compete for promotion to upper level jobs with other Federal employees under internal merit promotion processes. Oftentimes, however, supervisors also consider applicants from outside the Federal Government to fill upper level jobs. Still, many of the upper level positions are filled through internal merit promotions. For example, the Partnership for Public Service, a nonprofit organization that promotes public service, reported that 58,181 (or 85 percent) of the 68,676 selections in 2003 at the GS-12 to -15 level were internal hires. Only 15 percent were filled with external applicants.<sup>10</sup>

Because a larger number of upper level positions are filled with internal applicants, many might think supervisors give Federal employees undue preference when filling such positions. Our data, however, suggest that most supervisors are committed to hiring the best qualified applicant with the right skills whatever the source.

Almost all supervisors (99 percent) surveyed for this study would like to see their own employees advance in their careers. Do they give undue preference to their own employees? Survey data suggest that this is not the case. While slightly less than half (48 percent) of supervisors agreed they prefer to consider internal merit promotion candidates *first*, which may include their own employees, before external applicants (38 percent neither agreed nor disagreed, while 14 percent disagreed), this does not necessarily mean that even these supervisors will select internal applicants every time. In fact, 63 percent of these supervisors agreed that they would select internal applicants only when they are at least as qualified as the external candidates (6 percent disagreed while 31 percent neither agreed nor disagreed).

Why then hire externally? **Figure 2** shows that the top reason supervisors selected an external applicant for their upper level position was that they believed the applicant was clearly better qualified than other candidates, including internal applicants (selected by 68 percent of supervisors). That supervisors selected candidates who were “clearly better qualified” is as it should be. This finding shows that supervisors were committed to the principle of merit and selected the candidate who was best qualified for the job regardless of whether the candidate was a Federal employee or not. Their need to improve the quality of their workforce, selected by 47 percent of supervisors, may also have influenced supervisors to select “clearly better qualified” candidates for their upper level positions.

---

<sup>10</sup> Partnership for Public Service, *Mid-Career Hiring: Revisiting the Search for Seasoned Talent in the Federal Government*, Washington, DC, September 2004, p. 6.

**Figure 2. Reasons Given by Supervisors for Hiring External Candidates (in Percent)**



Source: MSPB Supervisory Upper Level New Hires Survey, question 5a-i.

An almost equally important reason they selected an applicant from outside the Federal Government was to fill a skills gap, as selected by 64 percent of supervisors. Skills gaps occurred for various reasons, including:

- Curtailment of entry-level hiring in the 1990s when the Government downsized and restructured its workforce. This curtailment disrupted the internal pipeline of qualified candidates who can be promoted to upper level positions as more of these positions were vacated due to an increasing number of retirements. OPM’s most recent retirement statistics showed that 55,848 Federal employees retired in FY 2004, a 23-percent increase from the 45,137 who retired in FY 2000.<sup>11</sup>
- Establishment of new programs brought about by new missions or mandates. For example, homeland security and national defense became more pressing after the terrorists attacks in 2001. To support these missions, the Department of Homeland Security was created. That department and others—particularly the Department of Defense and its major components—that support these missions acquired more employees with expertise in security management, logistics and intelligence.

<sup>11</sup> Retirement data available from <http://www.opm.gov/feddata/retire/rs2004.pdf>, Jun. 25, 2007. Retirement of Federal employees is projected to increase during the period FY 2006 through FY 2010. OPM has projected that about 18.5 percent of retirement eligible employees will retire during that 5-year period. This rate is 3.8 percent higher than the 14.7 percent retirement during FY 2000-FY 2004.

## Why Supervisors Hire From Outside

- The Government's increasing reliance on technology to deliver services to the American people. This reliance coupled with fast-changing technology necessitated the hiring of new employees with expertise in this field.
- The public's increasing and changing needs for Government services that necessitated the hiring of more employees with expertise in specific areas gained only through extensive education and training, such as expertise in medicine or law.

With 95 percent of supervisors having hired the candidate they believed to be the best qualified, it is not surprising that a majority of these supervisors (67 percent) indicated that the overall quality of the external applicant they hired was better than that of other Federal employees they knew in similar positions. Furthermore, an overwhelming majority of supervisors (95 percent) indicated that the individual they hired had the talent they needed to accomplish their mission.

# Who Were the Upper Level New Hires

In FY 2005, the Government filled more than 12,000 professional and administrative positions at the GS-12 to -15 grade levels with external applicants. **Table 2** shows that more hiring occurred at the GS-12 and -13 than at the GS-14 and -15 levels. The table also shows that a higher percentage of administrative than professional positions were filled at the GS-12 level, while relatively more professional positions were filled at the GS-15 level. About an equal percentage of professional and administrative positions were filled at the GS-13 and -14 levels.

Grade	Professional	Administrative
GS 12	36	46
GS 13	30	34
GS 14	14	14
GS 15	20	6

Source: OPM, Central Personnel Data File.

The Government's hiring pattern largely followed its overall priorities. Priority programs are likely to receive the best funding, and agencies responsible for carrying out these programs will concentrate their hiring efforts to support these programs. For example, the Government's two major priorities since 9/11 have been homeland security and national defense. **Table 3** shows that agencies whose mission is in homeland security or national defense did proportionately more of the upper level hiring compared to their share of the upper level workforce. For example, the Department of Homeland Security employed 1.9 percent of all the upper level workforce in FY 2005, but hired 5.3 percent of all the upper level new hires. The Departments of Air Force, Army and Navy also hired proportionately more upper level new hires than their share of the upper level workforce.

**Table 3. Percent of Upper Level New Hires and Upper Level Workforce by Agency, FY 2005**

Agency	New Hires	Upper Level Workforce
Department of the Army	18.2	12.2
Department of the Navy	12.2	12.0
Department of the Air Force	10.9	7.1
Department of Veterans Affairs	10.1	6.2
Department of Health & Human Services	8.0	4.8
Department of Homeland Security	5.3	1.9
Department of Defense (Other)	5.2	5.3
Department of Treasury	3.9	8.2
Social Security Administration	3.1	2.3
Department of Agriculture	2.9	4.8
All others	20.2	35.2

Source: OPM, Central Personnel Data File.

Moreover, a closer review of CPDF data showed that the level of hiring did not occur equally across the departments. The hiring of new upper level employees was often concentrated in a few subordinate agencies of a department or in a certain office or division in an agency. For example, although the Department of the Army hired 18 percent of all of the new upper level employees in FY 2005, they were concentrated in a few subordinate commands, such as the Intelligence and Security Command, Medical Command and Training and Doctrine Command. This hiring pattern was also reflected at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). VA hired 10 percent of the new upper level employees, but the increase in upper level hiring mostly occurred at the Veterans Health Administration, the agency responsible for providing health-care services to veterans.

Agencies given new mandates or programs also did much of the upper level hiring. For example, the Department of Health and Human Services hired 8 percent of all of the upper level new employees although it employed just 4.8 percent of the upper level workforce. Most of this increase occurred at the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, the agency responsible for implementing the Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement, and Modernization Act of 2003.

The Government's priorities also influenced the types of positions filled. For example, the technological revolution that allowed the Government to integrate technology with analysis, strategy and decisionmaking has played a major part in how the Government operates and delivers services to the public. In the last two decades, the Government has procured billions of dollars worth of technology<sup>12</sup> to automate systems. Additionally, the President's Management Agenda, which called for an expanded electronic Government (e-Gov) to provide greater services to the

<sup>12</sup> David Perera, *Piling Up*, Government Executive, Aug. 15, 2006, p. 62.

public at lower cost, has further increased the use of technology in the workplace.<sup>13</sup> These initiatives have necessitated the hiring of new employees capable of operating, administering and managing the technology. Thus, as **Table 4** shows, information technology (IT) management was the most commonly filled type of occupation because it cuts across all agencies whether or not they are involved in defense or homeland security. The Social Security Administration, for example, hired 19 percent of all IT personnel, followed by the Army at 13 percent.

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Information technology management	12.4
General management & administration	9.0
Medical officer	7.1
Program and management analysis	6.1
Attorney	5.4
Intelligence	4.4
Security administration	2.6
Logistics management	2.4
General engineering	2.2
Internal revenue agent	1.6

Source: OPM, Central Personnel Data File.

**Table 4** also shows that many of the occupations filled reflected the Government's priorities in homeland security or national defense. Agencies involved in these priorities increased the hiring of new employees with expertise in intelligence and security management, for example. The Departments of the Army, Air Force, Navy and Homeland Security hired 93 percent of the upper level new hires involved in intelligence. This group of agencies also hired 64 percent of the new hires involved in security administration and 94 percent of those involved in logistics management. Not surprisingly, about 70 percent of new medical officers were hired by the Department of Veterans Affairs for its medical centers.

## Average Age

The average age of upper level new hires in FY 2005 was 43.5 years. This group is slightly older than new employees hired at similar grade levels in FY 1990, whose average age was then 39.7 years. **Table 5** shows that in FY 2005 many more new hires were 45 years or older than was the case in FY 1990. Although older workers, defined as any worker age 55 or older,<sup>14</sup> stay employed longer now than they did in the past, agencies need to be aware that many of these new hires could have shorter

<sup>13</sup> Executive Office of the President, *Office of Management and Budget*, The President's Management Agenda, Fiscal Year 2002, pp. 23-25.

<sup>14</sup> James J. Kirk and Robert Belovics, *Recommendations and Resources for Counseling Older Workers*, Journal of Employment Counseling, vol. 42, Iss. 2, June 2005, pp. 50-59.



## Who Were the Upper Level New Hires

Government careers. New upper level employees who are 55 or older become retirement eligible with 7 years or less of Federal service.

<b>Age Group</b>	<b>FY 1990</b>	<b>FY 2005</b>
24 and younger	—	—
25-34	34	18
35-44	39	35
45-54	20	35
55 and older	7	12

Source: OPM, Central Personnel Data File.

## Educational Attainment

The FY 2005 upper level new hires were highly educated. Seventy-five percent of the new hires had at least bachelor's degrees. The higher the grade, the more educated the new hires were: 93 percent of GS-15 new hires had at least a bachelor's degree, while 83 percent of GS-14s, 76 percent of GS-13s and 66 percent of GS-12s did so. As expected, more new hires in professional occupations had at least a bachelor's degree (94 percent) than new hires in administrative occupations (61 percent).

## Supervisory Level

About 13 percent of FY 2005's upper level new hires were appointed to managerial or supervisory positions. This is a small proportion of the more than 120,000 upper level supervisors and managers who were on board in FY 2005. Even so, how prepared these new supervisors are for their supervisory or managerial role may be an issue. An MSPB study on supervisory selection found that agencies more often select supervisors based on technical expertise than on supervisory potential.<sup>15</sup> Coming from the outside and not being familiar with Government processes mean that new supervisors and managers like those in our study may require more assistance than agencies usually expect to provide. An effective orientation program and comprehensive training in supervision and management may be particularly critical for new supervisors and managers who were hired from outside the Government.<sup>16</sup>

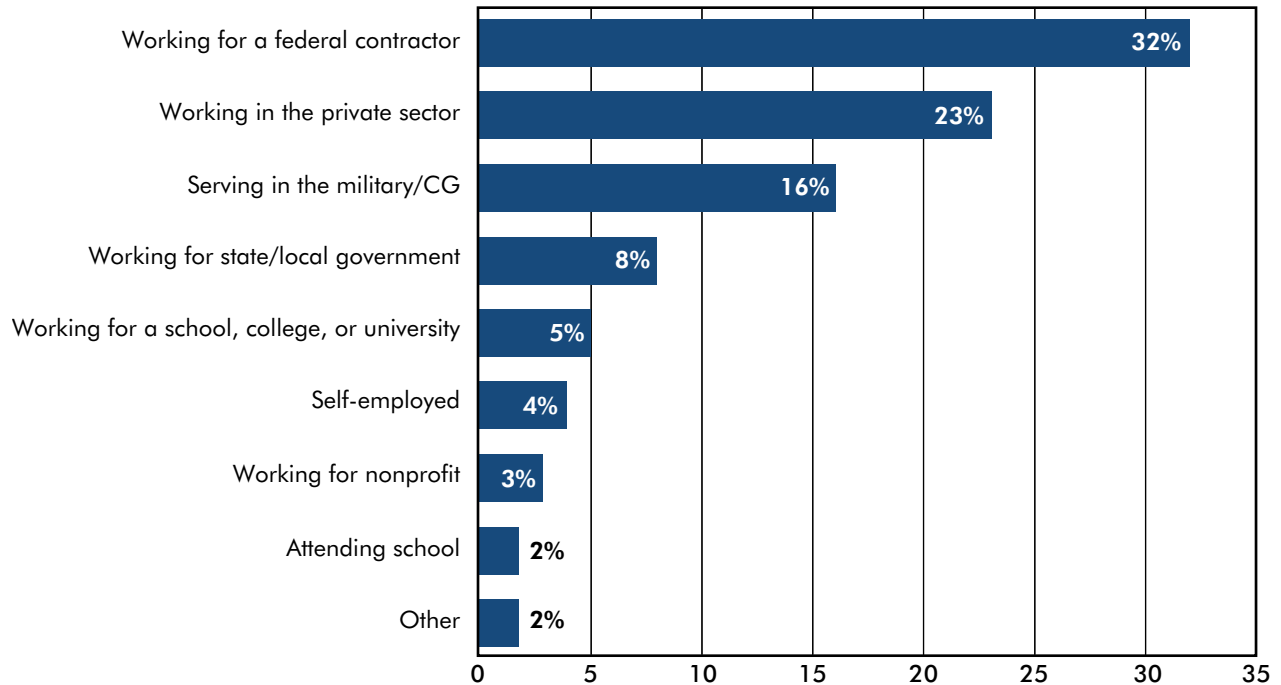
<sup>15</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *Federal First-Line Supervisors: How Good Are They?*, Washington, DC, March 1992.

<sup>16</sup> To address the inconsistencies and inadequacies of training for new supervisors, Senator Daniel Akaka offered in the Senate the Federal Supervisor Training Act (S-967) in March 2007. The proposed bill requires agencies to train new supervisors within 1 year of being appointed and to retrain them every 3 years.

## Work Background

Survey data show that the upper level new employees are highly experienced. When asked how many years of work experience they had before joining the Federal civil service, more than half (53 percent) of our respondents indicated 20 or more years and 35 percent had 6 to 20 years. **Figure 3** shows that the new hires had gained their prior work experience in various sectors of the economy, working for private sector firms, schools, state and local governments, or nonprofits.

**Figure 3. Respondents' Work Background (in Percent)**



Source: MSPB Upper Level New Hires Survey, question 8.

**Figure 3** also shows that about half of the new hires responding to our survey had some Government-related experience, not as Federal civilian employees, but either as former Federal contractors or members of the military. Either kind of experience can give them advantages—especially for those who worked alongside civilian Federal employees—over applicants without this experience, such as:

- Familiarity with the various positions available, which can help them determine what types of jobs they can qualify for.
- Better access to job information through personal contacts with people who have knowledge of job vacancies.
- Better understanding of the culture of the agency to which they are applying.
- Better knowledge of the Federal hiring process, which can help them strategize their job search.
- Already being known to hiring officials.

That Government-related experience can provide former Federal contractors and military personnel with advantages that can influence selection is supported by results of an MSPB survey of Federal supervisors and managers in FY 1997. Some 76 percent of respondents selected job-related experience as the most important factor when hiring from outside the Federal workforce.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, we believe that when the experience was gained in a Federal setting, the external candidate can closely resemble an internal candidate and can easily be found “clearly better qualified” for selection. If the experience is truly relevant to the job being filled, the Government has gained an experienced worker who “can hit the ground running.” However, if the experience simply provided the applicant with familiarity with the work environment but not with the necessary knowledge, skills and abilities to perform the work, then the Government may have acquired a poor hire.

## Women and Minorities

The Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 codified the merit system principles that require the Government to have a workforce that is reflective of America, usually understood as comparable to the makeup of the Nation’s Civilian Labor Force (CLF). To ensure that the Federal workforce is reflective of America, OPM annually reports to Congress on the progress being made in the employment of women and minorities. In its FY 2006 report, OPM noted that the Government “continues to be a leader in providing employment opportunities to minorities” but that Hispanics and women remained underrepresented in the Federal workforce when compared to their representation in the CLF.<sup>18</sup>

Gender, Race and National Origin	Percent
Men	71.2
Women	28.7
Asian/Pacific Islander	6.6
Black	10.5
Hispanic	4.0
Native American	0.8
White	78.1
All minority	21.9

Source: OPM, Central Personnel Data File.

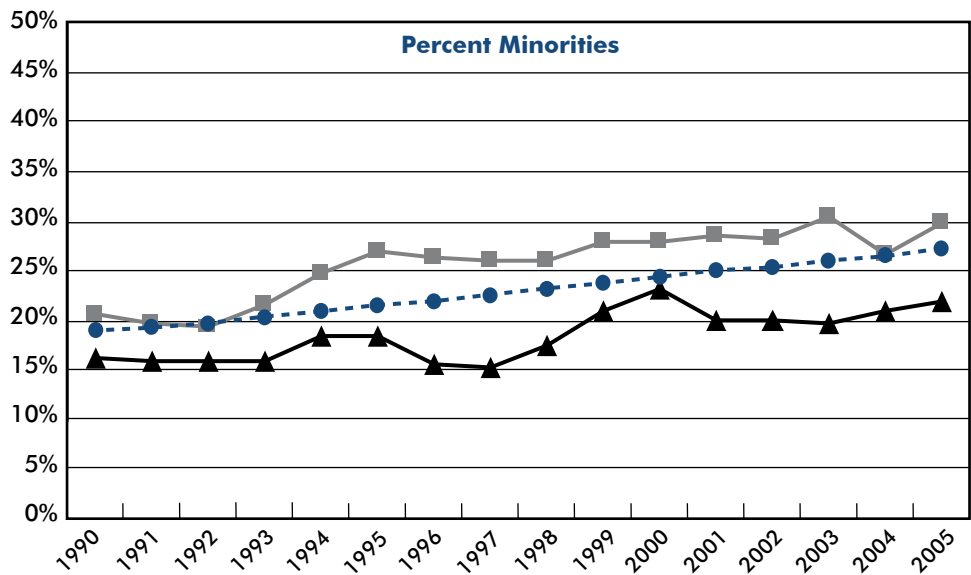
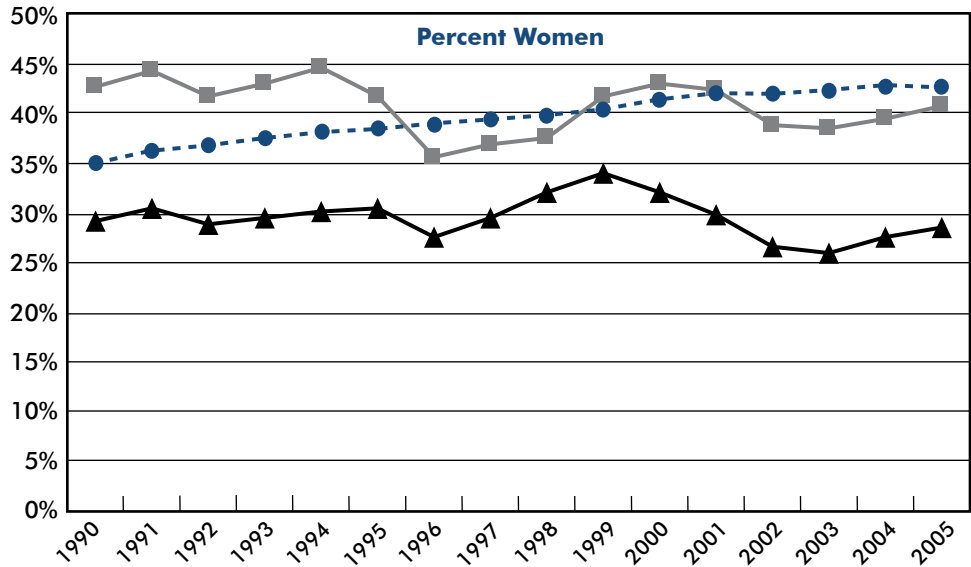
Our research reveals that the hiring of professional and administrative new employees at the upper level grades may have contributed, in some measure, to this under-representation. **Table 6** shows that in FY 2005 the vast majority of the new hires in the upper level professional and administrative occupations were

<sup>17</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *Help Wanted: A Review of Federal Vacancy Announcements*, Washington, DC, April 2003, p. 15.

<sup>18</sup> U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *Annual Report to the Congress: Federal Employment Recruitment Program FY 2006*, <http://www.opm.gov/feorpreports/2006/feorp2006.pdf>, as of Mar. 13, 2007.

nonminority men. While the hiring of women and minorities increased in 16 years (FY 1990-FY 2005), agencies were more successful in hiring women and minorities at the lower grades than at the upper level grades, as **Figure 4** shows. Hiring proportionately fewer women and minorities at the upper levels has had a negative effect on the overall representation of women and minorities in the professional and administrative occupations and reduced the amount of progress women and Hispanics have made in achieving parity. This disproportionate hiring of nonminority males at the upper level grades will also make it difficult to achieve parity within each higher level grade.

**Figure 4. Women and Minorities as a Percent of Overall Professional and Administrative Workforce and Upper and Lower Level New Hires, FY 1990-FY 2005**



- - ● - - Overall P/A Workforce  
 — ▲ — GS 12-15 New Hires  
 — ■ — GS 5-11 New Hires

Source: OPM, Central Personnel Data File.

Did women and minorities encounter barriers during selection for upper level jobs? While a definitive answer to this question is beyond the scope of this study, it is clear that the hiring of women and minorities is influenced both by the grades of the positions and by the types of occupations being filled. It is also influenced by the methods of hiring used, which will be discussed in the next section of this report.

Generally, in FY 2005, there were fewer women and minorities at the upper level positions compared to their share in the overall Federal workforce. However, a review of a sampling of occupations shows that for some, but not all, occupations, the proportions of female and minority applicants hired exceeded Relevant Civilian Labor Force (RCLF) figures.<sup>19</sup> Men have traditionally dominated the law enforcement, engineering, information technology, legal and medical professions. However, Table 7 shows that there were occupations in which the Government exceeded RCLF figures for women and minorities, such as in law and medicine. The Government also exceeded RCLF figures for Blacks in all other occupations (an equal share in engineering) except for detectives and criminal investigation and tax examining. Nonetheless, **Table 7** also shows that for other occupations, Government statistics for women and other minorities compare unfavorably with RCLF figures. Therefore, the Government has more work to do towards obtaining a workforce reflective of the public it serves.

Ideally, equally qualified women and men, minorities and nonminorities should have the same job opportunities and chances of being hired. Why were agencies more successful in hiring women and minorities in upper level grades in certain occupations and not others? It is unclear whether this resulted from agencies doing targeted recruiting, or from women and minorities exercising individual choice in applying for and accepting jobs. It is possible that women and minorities are attracted to certain occupations in the Federal Government because of the desire to serve the public.<sup>20</sup> Or, the Federal Government may hold special appeal to women and minorities in certain occupations because they perceive the Government as having more commitment to fairness and equal opportunity. It could also be that agencies have exerted more effort in attracting women and minorities in hard-to-fill occupations, such as medicine and law. MSPB has just begun a more detailed study on the hiring of women and minorities that we hope will shed more light on this issue. The report is projected to be released in 2008.

---

<sup>19</sup> The Relevant Civilian Labor Force is the Civilian Labor Force data that are directly comparable (or relevant) to the occupational population being considered in the Federal workforce. To make the Federal workforce data comparable to the RCLF, we used earnings as the control variable. For this study, those whose earnings were \$35,000 or more were considered to be the likely applicant pool for upper level positions.

<sup>20</sup> Stella Perrott, *Gender, Professions and Management in the Public Sector*, Public Money & Management, January-March 2002, pp. 21-24.

**Table 7. Percent Employed in the Relevant Civilian Labor Force Earning \$35,000 or More and Upper Level New Hires by Occupations, Race and Hispanic Origin**

Occupation	Relevant Civilian Labor Force*					Upper Level New Hires#				
	Women	Native American	Asian <sup>&amp;</sup>	Black	Hispanic	Women	Native American	Asian <sup>&amp;</sup>	Black	Hispanic
Accountants and Auditors	45.3	0.3	7.6	6.5	3.9	<b>45.5</b>	—	7.3	<b>16.4</b>	<b>4.8</b>
Computer Scientists and Systems Analysts	31.1	0.3	10.7	6.8	3.9	23.7	<b>1.8</b>	9.4	<b>14.0</b>	3.4
Detectives and Criminal Investigators	16.7	0.5	1.5	10.1	9.5	14.0	<b>1.1</b>	<b>2.2</b>	6.5	5.4
Electrical and Electronics Engineers	7.5	0.2	12.0	4.0	3.8	<b>9.9</b>	<b>0.6</b>	5.5	<b>4.4</b>	2.0
Lawyers	26.3	0.2	2.1	3.5	3.1	<b>46.7</b>	<b>0.3</b>	<b>5.3</b>	<b>7.9</b>	<b>4.4</b>
Logisticians	27.0	0.3	3.4	8.9	5.7	7.0	—	1.0	<b>11.0</b>	4.3
Management Analysts	34.2	0.2	5.6	5.2	3.2	27.4	0.7	3.2	<b>9.8</b>	2.9
Physicians and Surgeons	24.3	0.1	14.4	4.2	4.9	<b>32.0</b>	<b>1.6</b>	<b>19.6</b>	<b>6.7</b>	<b>5.1</b>
Tax Examiners, Collectors and Revenue Agents	47.3	0.3	4.8	15.3	7.5	<b>49.0</b>	—	<b>12.0</b>	7.0	3.0

Note: Numbers in bold indicate where the Government hired an equal or a higher percentage than is reflected in the RCLF.

\* From U.S. Census Bureau, "Census 2000 EEO Data Tool," at <http://www.census.gov/eo2000/index.html>.

# From OPM, Central Personnel Data File, FY 2005.

<sup>&</sup> Includes Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander.

Beyond these occupational differences, there is additional room for improvement in the hiring of women and minorities in the upper level grades. (Although MSPB has no basis to say definitively that there have been no discriminatory practices involved in the hiring of upper level personnel, neither can we say that none has occurred.) The first merit system principle calls for a Government that *reflects all segments of society*. Given the findings of this study, agencies must be especially mindful of this principle when filling their upper level jobs. Increasing the overall representation of women and minorities at these levels may be challenging because women and/or minorities are underrepresented in many of the occupations covered by the upper level Government positions. However, success is not impossible. The authorities or programs agencies use to appoint new hires have an important impact on who they hire since these authorities or programs help determine the recruiting strategies and assessment methods that can be used, as well as the population that is eligible for consideration. Ensuring that all involved have full knowledge of the hiring authorities and making improvements in recruiting and assessing applicants can address some of the issues in the hiring of women and minorities. These topics are discussed in more detail later in this report.



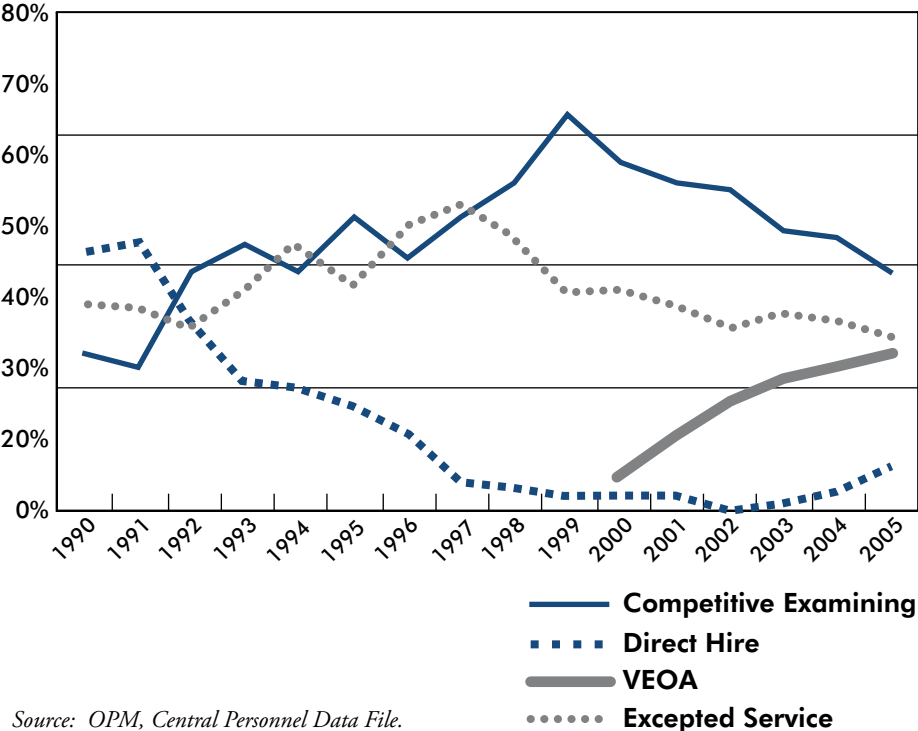
# How They Were Hired

Both competitive and excepted appointments can be made from sources outside the Government. New employees are appointed to their jobs under various authorities or methods, each of which has certain requirements. Here we look at the four most commonly used authorities or methods for hiring new upper level employees.

## Excepted Service Hiring

Figure 5 shows that 29 percent of all new upper level employees hired in FY 2005 were in the excepted service. After peaking in FY 1997 at 49 percent, the proportion of excepted service hiring has remained relatively steady, ranging from 29 to 33 percent.

**Figure 5. Methods Used to Hire New Upper Level Employees, FY 1990-FY 2005 (in Percent)**



Source: OPM, Central Personnel Data File.



Agencies filling excepted service positions apply their own hiring process to appoint new upper level employees, but they must adhere to the first merit system principle, which requires them to recruit from all segments of society and select employees solely on merit after fair and open competition. In addition, agencies must follow equal employment and veterans' preference rules. The excepted appointments shown in Figure 5 were made either by excepted service agencies (e.g., the Federal Aviation Administration and the intelligence agencies) or in defined excepted service positions in other agencies. Because many excepted service positions in agencies whose positions are not generally excluded from the competitive service are in fields that require certification or licensing beyond the Government's control, such as law or medicine, it is not practicable to hold a competitive examination for them or to apply the usual competitive examining procedures to them.

## Competitive Service Hiring

Agencies can use a variety of hiring authorities or methods to appoint new upper level employees into competitive service positions. The three most commonly used authorities are the competitive examining process, direct hire authority, and the Veterans Employment Opportunity Act (VEOA).

### Competitive Examining

Upper level positions in the competitive service are traditionally filled through the competitive examining procedure established and controlled by the Office of Personnel Management. Under competitive examining:

- Positions are open to the public.<sup>21</sup> Public notice is required, which means that vacancies must be announced and posted on USAJOBS, the Government's central repository of job information.<sup>22</sup>
- Applicants are rated against set criteria.
- Veterans' preference rules are applied.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Executive Order 11935 requires that only a U.S. citizen or national may be appointed to the competitive service. However, in specific cases, OPM may authorize the appointment of aliens to competitive service jobs to promote the efficiency of the service, as an exception to the Order and to the extent permitted by law.

<sup>22</sup> USAJOBS can be accessed through <http://www.usajobs.gov>, <http://www.usajobs.com>, or <http://www.usajobs.opm.gov> on the World Wide Web and by telephone at (703) 724-1850 or TDD (978) 461-8404.

<sup>23</sup> Veterans' preference provides entitled individuals an advantage over non-veterans in hiring. When numerical scores are given, applicants who are entitled to veterans' preference have 5 or 10 points added to their passing numerical scores and are listed ahead of those without veterans' preference with equal or lower scores. When quality groupings are used instead of numerical scores, applicants with veterans' preference are placed on top of their quality group. Note that not all veterans are eligible for veterans' preference. Veterans are entitled to veterans' preference if they have a compensable disability or served on active duty in the armed forces during certain specified time periods or in military campaigns. Those who retired with a rank of major or above are not eligible for veterans' preference unless they have a compensable disability. Also, some family members of deceased or totally disabled veterans receive veterans' preference even though they have not served in the military.

- Candidates are ranked and referred in score order or quality order, i.e., highest scoring candidates or candidates in the highest quality group are referred first for selection. However, compensably disabled veterans “float” to the top, except for scientific and professional upper level positions.<sup>24</sup>

**Figure 5** shows that competitive examining was the most commonly used method to appoint new employees at grades GS-12 to -15 in the competitive service in FY 2005. In that year, non-Defense agencies, except the Department of Veterans Affairs, relied heavily on competitive examining to hire new employees for their upper level jobs. However, **Figure 5** also shows that the use of competitive examining has been decreasing from its peak in FY 1999, when it was used 64 percent of the time. By FY 2005, the proportion had declined to 39 percent of all new upper level hires. This decrease corresponded with the creation of the Veterans Employment Opportunity Act in 1998, which we will discuss following the discussion on direct hire.

### Direct Hire

Agencies use this method of hiring when there is a shortage of qualified candidates; i.e., an agency is unable to identify qualified candidates despite extensive recruitment or extended announcement periods; or an agency has a critical hiring need, such as one caused by an emergency or unanticipated events, or changed mission requirements.

Direct hire provides a quick way to hire individuals in the competitive service. Although it requires agencies to publicly post their vacancies on USAJOBS, they do not need to apply veterans’ preference or rate and rank qualified candidates. Once a qualified candidate is found, agencies may offer the job on the spot and may appoint the candidate immediately. OPM has allowed the Governmentwide use of direct hire for the following occupations:

- Information technology management related to security;
- X-ray technicians;
- Medical officers, nurses and pharmacists; and
- Positions involved in Iraqi reconstruction efforts that require fluency in Arabic.

An agency may also request OPM approval to have direct hire authority for specific positions in which it has demonstrated a severe shortage or critical need exists. In FY 2005, 7 agencies appointed 377 new upper level employees using direct hire authority specifically approved for their own use.

<sup>24</sup> There are two methods in which rated and ranked candidates can be referred for selection. (1) The Rule of Three is a method of referral that refers—based on their numerical scores—the three top ranked candidates first, except that compensably disabled veterans are placed above all others. (2) Category Rating is a method that groups qualified candidates in two or more quality categories instead of ranking them by numerical scores. All candidates within a quality group are treated as equally qualified and all are referred for selection although candidates with veterans’ preference are placed above nonveterans.

**Figure 5** shows that the use of direct hire has declined from its peak of 3,676 in FY 1991. In 2005, the Federal Government hired 837 new upper level employees using direct hire authority, which is less than one-quarter of those hired in FY 1991. Twenty-three agencies used direct hire authority in FY 2005, but the overwhelming majority of the new employees (83 percent) were hired by five agencies (the Departments of Health and Human Services, the Army, the Navy and Homeland Security and the Social Security Administration). In keeping with the intent of the authority, and as reflective of the top users of the authority, 73 percent of the 837 new hires were appointed in 4 types of occupations: information technology management, medicine, nursing and health insurance administration.<sup>25</sup>

### Veterans Hiring

In FY 2005, 42 percent of all upper level new hires were former military members, a 12-percent increase in hiring since FY 2001.<sup>26</sup> Although former military members were hired in both the excepted and the competitive service, the overwhelming majority (77 percent) were appointed in the competitive service. Of those appointed in the competitive service, 71 percent were appointed through the VEOA,<sup>27</sup> a quarter were appointed under competitive examining, and the remaining 4 percent under direct hire.

The VEOA was enacted in October 1998 to give former military members the opportunity to compete for jobs that are normally open only to internal candidates. That is, when agencies decide to open their internal merit promotion vacancies to Federal employees other than their own, they must also accept applications from VEOA-eligible veterans. Both military officers and enlisted personnel are eligible for VEOA appointments if they were separated from the armed forces under honorable conditions after completing 3 or more years of active service. To be selected, the veteran must be found to be among the best qualified. Because internal merit promotion procedures are used, veterans' preference rules do not apply. That is, veterans who are preference-eligible do not receive additional points to their rating score or "float" to the top of the list of referred candidates.

---

<sup>25</sup> The direct hire authority to appoint outside applicants for the health insurance administration positions was approved for the Department of Health and Human Services to staff its Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. The Centers are responsible for implementing the new Medicare prescription drug program.

<sup>26</sup> Unless otherwise noted, veterans hiring as discussed in this report pertains to the hiring of individuals who served on active duty in the armed forces and was released or discharged under other than dishonorable conditions. They may or may not have veterans' preference.

<sup>27</sup> Initially, appointments under the VEOA were only in the excepted service. Congress amended the VEOA in 1999 (P.L. 106-117), providing that if an eligible veteran competes under an agency's merit promotion procedures and is selected, the veteran will be given a career or career-conditional appointment in the competitive service.

Since its implementation, the use of the VEOA has grown considerably. In FY 2000, 520 veterans (equal to 6 percent of all upper level new hires) were hired under this method to fill upper level jobs. By FY 2005, the number had grown to 3,132 (equal to 26 percent of all upper level new hires). Notably in FY 2005, DoD and its components hired 86 percent of all VEOA selections made that year.

As stated, the hiring of former military members to fill upper level vacancies has been increasing, especially after 9/11. Among the various reasons for the increase is that VEOA has made hiring of former military members without veterans' preference easier for agencies. Since veterans' preference rules do not apply under the VEOA, former military officers who are not eligible for preference can easily be selected so long as they are rated one of the best qualified candidates. Veterans, especially officers, typically have the education, training and leadership experience that make them strong candidates for upper level positions. Additionally, the Government's increased emphasis on homeland security and national defense makes many veterans ideal candidates for upper level jobs. Given these positives, it is not surprising that in FY 2005 former military members comprised the majority of upper level new hires in security (74 percent), logistics (90 percent), contracting (66 percent) and intelligence (70 percent). They were also strong candidates for supervisory or managerial positions, in keeping with a study conducted by Korn/Ferry International in which researchers found that "military training offers lessons in leadership that can prove invaluable in the boardroom."<sup>28</sup> That this can also be true in the Federal Government is demonstrated by FY 2005 data showing that 18 percent of the veterans hired in upper level positions were appointed in supervisory/managerial positions, compared with only 8 percent of nonveterans. Another reason former military members are attractive as potential civilian employees is that they often possess security clearances. Many positions, especially those involved in national defense or homeland security, require security clearances that can be very difficult and take a long time to obtain. Because many military personnel have current or easily updatable security clearances, they can have a significant advantage over candidates who do not have security clearances.

---

<sup>28</sup> Tim Duffy, *Military Experience & CEOs: Is There a Link?*, Korn/Ferry International in cooperation with the Economist Intelligence, 2006.

## Achieving a Representative Workforce

Earlier we discussed the fact that the types of positions filled at these upper levels affect the demographic composition of the upper level workforce. **Table 8** shows that the hiring method used also affects this composition.

Demographics	Hiring Method			
	Competitive Examining	Direct Hire	VEOA	Excepted
Men	63.8	53.8	89.2	69.7
Women	36.2	46.2	10.8	30.3
All minority	24.0	25.6	17.6	22.0
Asian/Pacific Islander	8.0	7.9	2.3	8.0
Black	11.6	12.5	10.7	8.4
Hispanic	3.7	4.4	4.2	4.0
Native American	0.7	0.7	0.4	1.5
White	75.4	73.8	82.0	77.5

Source: OPM, Central Personnel Data File.

**Table 8** shows that disproportionately more men were hired under all the hiring methods, especially the VEOA. Almost 9 in 10 of the VEOA hires were men. As also shown in the table, the different minority groups did not fare equally across the hiring methods. Hispanics did comparatively poorly under all of the hiring methods. While there is no evidence that the disparate hiring of various groups is a result of discriminatory practices, it is clear that the hiring methods used have an impact on the demographic composition of the new hires, especially under the VEOA.

It is important to note that as a matter of public policy, former military members have hiring preferences that are dictated by laws that provide them those benefits. Furthermore, many of these former military members are highly qualified for their upper level jobs. Under veterans' preference laws, disabled veterans only have to meet minimum qualifications to be referred for selection. Other veterans, however, must be found best qualified or rated among the top to be referred under veterans' preference laws or VEOA. Thus, for these highly qualified veterans, their selection is based on merit.

While the hiring of veterans complies with the law, it would be difficult for the Government to achieve a workforce reflective of America at the higher grade levels if the current composition of the military and the agencies' hiring practices remain unchanged. As **Table 9** shows, in FY 2004, the commissioned officer corps—the group most likely to qualify for the upper level jobs—of the various armed services (Coast Guard, Air Force, Army, Navy and Marines) was primarily comprised of nonminority males. The proportion of minorities in the commissioned officer corps

of the various armed services ranged from 16 percent in the Coast Guard to 25 percent in the Army, and the proportion of women ranged from 6 percent in the Marines to 18 percent in the Air Force.<sup>29</sup> The table also shows that these percentages somewhat reflect the demographics of former military members hired in FY 2005 in upper level jobs: 19 percent were minorities, while 12 percent were women. These demographics for the commissioned officer corps make clear how difficult it would be for the Government to increase the participation of minorities and women in the workforce if the current hiring trends at the upper level grades continue. The hiring of women and Hispanics into upper level positions will not significantly increase unless agencies make a special effort to attract and hire more qualified women and Hispanics under the VEOA or through the use of other hiring authorities.

Demographics	New Hires, FY 2005 <sup>#</sup>	Commissioned Officer Corps, FY 2004 <sup>@</sup>				
		Air Force	Army	Coast Guard	Marines	Navy
Men	88.0	81.7	83.3	85.1	94.2	84.8
Women	12.0	18.3	16.7	14.9	5.8	15.2
Black	11.6	6.5	12.3	4.7	5.6	7.2
Hispanic	4.4	3.7	5.0	5.1	6.2	5.2
Other minority*	3.0	8.4	7.3	6.0	11.2	7.2
All minority	19.0	18.6	24.6	15.8	23.0	19.6
White	80.5	81.4	75.4	84.2	77.0	80.4

<sup>#</sup>Source: OPM, Central Personnel Data File.

<sup>@</sup>Source: <http://www.armyg1.army.mil/hr/demographics.asp>.

\* Includes Asian/Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaskan Native.

Veterans' rights and the first merit principle need not be an either/or proposition. We believe agencies can meet their obligations to veterans and *achieve a workforce that is representative of all segments of society* by addressing both in their strategic recruitment plans. Moreover, military data MSPB obtained from the Office of the Secretary of Defense show that the composition of the various armed services is changing. In fact, the proportion of women and minorities—for both commissioned officers and enlisted personnel—increased from FY 2000 to FY 2005. We have no reason to believe that this trend will not continue. As more military occupations open up to women, women will find a military career a viable option, which can encourage more women to join the military. An increase in the proportion of women and minorities in the military would mean an increase of women and minority veterans in the labor pool from which agencies can potentially select to fill upper level positions under VEOA. Additionally, agencies should make strategic use of other hiring authorities available to them to ensure that they have a representative workforce at all grade levels.

<sup>29</sup> Profiles of active duty commissioned officers in the Coast Guard, Army, Air Force and Navy are available at <http://www.armyg1.army.mil/hr/demographics.asp>.



# How They Learned About Job Vacancies

To have a workforce that is reflective of America, agencies must develop and use recruitment strategies that attract a qualified and diverse pool of applicants. Potential applicants must have ready access to information about job vacancies and be given adequate opportunity to apply. However, upper level new hires' responses to our survey indicate that information about many upper level job vacancies may be limited, hard to find, or both. When asked whether Federal job vacancies open to external applicants can be found easily, 21 percent of our respondents said they could not.

Agencies filling competitive service positions through competitive examining, direct hire, and the VEOA are required to post their vacancy announcements on USAJOBS, but may also employ other recruitment strategies, such as placing paid advertising in trade journals, newspapers, or magazines; participating in job fairs; or contracting recruiting support from commercial firms. Even so, responses to our survey suggest that applicants for upper level positions rely heavily on word of mouth for job information. Some 45 percent of the new hires had first learned about their new Federal job from their friends and relatives (17 percent), their new Federal supervisors (15 percent), or their new Federal co-workers (13 percent). In comparison, only about a quarter (23 percent) of our respondents first learned about their Federal job through USAJOBS. Even fewer new hires first learned about their jobs through newspaper, journal, or magazine ads (2 percent) or from a Federal recruiter (1 percent). Friends and relatives were especially useful to new hires who previously were self-employed, unemployed, or working for a nonprofit or private company. Respondents who were former military personnel or employees of Federal contractors were more likely to have first learned about their jobs from their new Federal supervisors or co-workers than from other sources.

To widen the reach of USAJOBS and to attract new talent to Federal service, OPM recently instituted a television recruitment campaign. The campaign highlights the breadth of work opportunities available in the Federal Government and encourages viewers to visit USAJOBS.<sup>30</sup> The ads have run in a variety of media markets, including Columbus, OH, Pittsburgh, PA, Waco, TX, and Fresno, CA. In every market where the ads were aired, OPM noted a significant spike in the

<sup>30</sup> See footnote 22 for the World Wide Web addresses.



number of people from those areas who visited the USAJOBS website.<sup>31</sup> The ad campaign appears to be a move in the right direction. Based on comments received from survey respondents, USAJOBS is not well known. (Note that only about a quarter of the upper-level new hires first learned about their Federal job through USAJOBS.) However, OPM's general ad campaign can be double-edged. While it can make more people aware of Federal job opportunities, which could lead to more potential applicants, a general ad campaign can create false expectations from people who are not strong candidates or whose skills do not match what agencies are seeking. Additionally, potential applicants can be turned off if they find vacancy announcements that are overly lengthy or poorly written. Although we have noted some improvements in the quality of vacancy announcements posted on USAJOBS since our vacancy announcement study in 2003, many announcements still have the problems we reported there (e.g., they are poorly written, confusing, or overly long).<sup>32</sup>

---

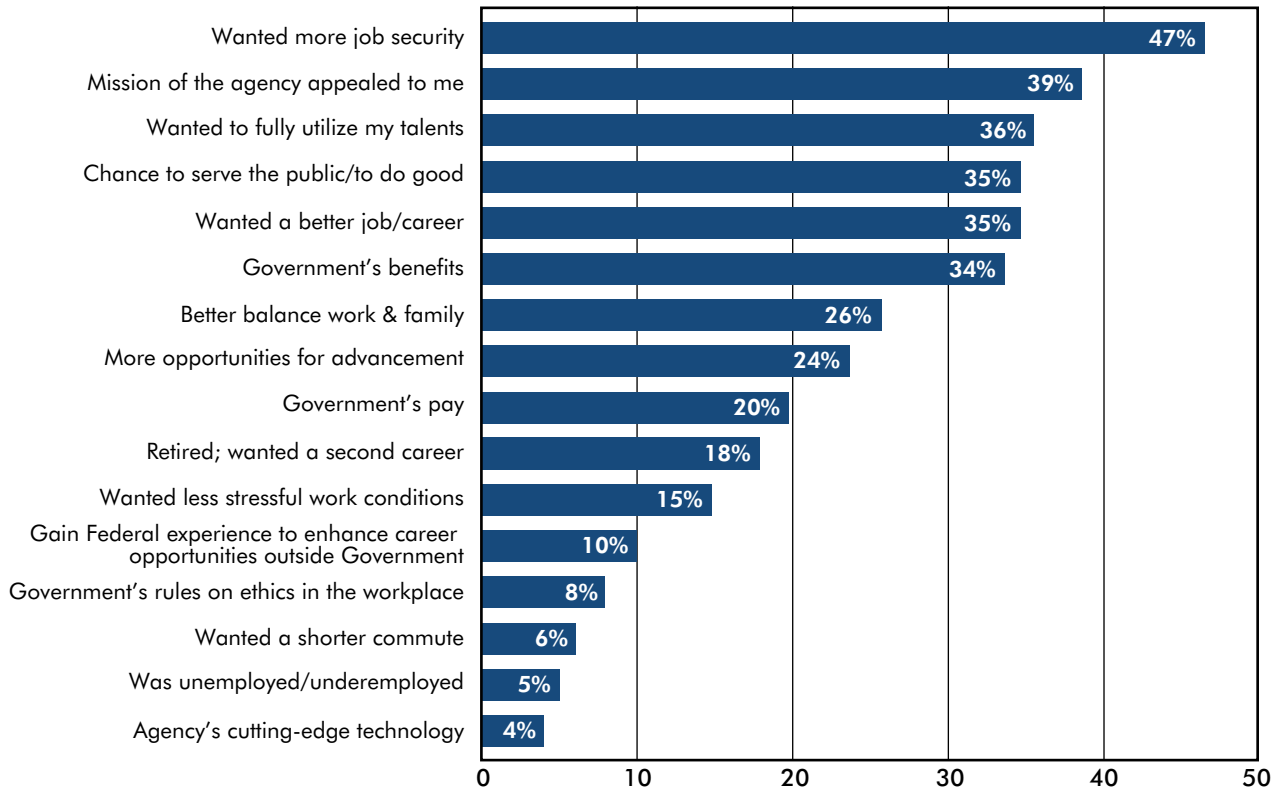
<sup>31</sup> U.S. Office of Personnel Management news releases, "Federal Recruiting Campaign Airing in Kansas City," Mar. 2, 2007, and "Three New Fed Recruiting Ads Premiere in Raleigh," Mar. 22, 2007.

<sup>32</sup> See U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *Help Wanted: A Review of Federal Vacancy Announcements*, Washington, DC, April 2003, and "Help Wanted for Vacancy Announcements," *Issues of Merit*, January 2006.

# Why They Applied for Their Jobs

There are many reasons applicants apply for and accept employment with the Federal Government, and understanding those reasons is critical in finding high-quality applicants. To find the reasons for applying, we asked the new hires to select all possible reasons—from a list of 16 possible reasons—they applied for their Federal jobs. Information about applicant motivation can help agencies, in search of highly skilled workers, to develop recruiting strategies that will attract a diverse pool of applicants with the skills and other qualities agencies need. While the first key decision influencing who is ultimately hired is the choice of hiring authority to use to make the appointment, the ensuing recruitment strategy is also key.<sup>33</sup>

**Figure 6. Reasons Upper Level New Hires Apply for Their Federal Job (in Percent)**



Source: MSPB Upper Level New Hires Survey, question 10a-p.

<sup>33</sup> The hiring authority will determine the necessary steps in the recruitment process and is thus inseparable from the recruitment strategy.

## Reasons for Applying for Federal Jobs

### **Job Security**

Much like entry level new hires,<sup>34</sup> job security was the number one reason upper level new hires applied for their Federal jobs (see **Figure 6**). Job security was especially critical among respondents whose preceding job was with a Government contractor (73 percent) and those who had been laid off (83 percent).

Obtaining a stable and secure job is a strong motivation for applicants to apply for Federal jobs and can be emphasized in efforts to attract high-quality applicants. However, in doing so, agencies must take care to ensure that applicants understand that the Government can only offer employment that is relatively stable and governed by employment practices that are fair. The Government does not guarantee a job for life. As with OPM's new general ad campaign, agencies should realize that job security motivation can be double-edged. People who accept Federal employment in search of security may remain committed to and highly motivated about their work. However, they may also expect this security to continue even when the need for their skills has disappeared.

### **Mission of Agency and Public Service**

About 4 in 10 respondents indicated that the mission of the agency was a reason they applied for their jobs. Some agencies have missions that appeal to individuals in particular occupations. NASA's space mission, naturally, has special appeal to aerospace engineers and physicists. The Veterans Affairs' mission to take care of wounded veterans has a special appeal to health care professionals who would like to give back to the men and women who fought to preserve America's freedom. In like manner, the mission of the Environmental Protection Agency to protect the air we breathe or the water we drink has special appeal to environmental scientists. Many other Federal agencies may also have unique missions that may appeal to certain segments of the labor pool. In fact, applicants sometimes accept substantial pay cuts to enter Government service because of the agency's missions or reputation.<sup>35</sup> Thus, it is important that agencies highlight their missions in their vacancy announcements. Some agencies already do this in their job announcements posted on USAJOBS; however, others do not.

In addition to having interest in an agency's particular mission, many of the new hires in the survey said that they applied because a job with the Government would give them a chance to serve the public. This reason was selected by 35 percent of respondents. The desire to serve the public or to do good is a component of what is termed "public service motivation," which has been found to have some

---

<sup>34</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *Attracting the Next Generation: A Look at Federal Entry Level New Hires*, Washington, DC, February 2008.

<sup>35</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *The Practice of Merit: A Symposium*, Washington, DC, September 2006, pp. 42-44.

value in the recruitment and selection of new employees.<sup>36</sup> The MSPB encourages agencies to use public service motivation in their recruitment efforts to attract applicants with the passion and commitment to carry out the work of the agency. The most important reason is that it would improve the quality of their workforces. Employees with high public service motivation have been found to be better performers than those with lower public service motivation.<sup>37</sup>

### Desire to Fully Utilize Talents and Have a Better Job

Another common reason for applying for Federal jobs is that applicants want to utilize their talents fully. This response—selected by 36 percent of our survey respondents—appeared across the various groups of respondents. Respondents who were unemployed desired it, as well as those who were employed. In addition to wanting to utilize their talents fully, many new hires applied for their Federal jobs because they wanted a better job or career (35 percent). Wanting a better job or career was particularly significant among respondents who had worked in schools (56 percent) or in the private sector (52 percent). In addition, 24 percent of respondents applied because they believed that the Government can offer them more opportunities for advancement.

Grade	Number
GS 12	211,208
GS 13	195,968
GS 14	98,314
GS 15	61,654

Source: <http://www.fedscope.opm.gov>.

These findings have both positive and negative implications. On the positive side, many respondents believe that the Federal Government is a place where they can find a better job and fully utilize their talents, hopes that are certainly realistic. However, the expectation that the Government will have better opportunities for advancement may cause problems for the 24 percent of new upper level employees who cited this, when they discover that they actually have rather limited room for advancement. **Table 10** shows that as grade level increases, the number of positions decreases, confirming that the potential for advancement may be considerably less than many believed. To ensure that new employees have clear expectations about advancement, agencies should respond unequivocally to inquiries and honestly portray career paths during selection interviews. Furthermore, agencies may need to use a variety of other tools to maintain new employees' engagement and interest once they are faced with the reality of limited opportunities for advancement. These

<sup>36</sup> Gregory A. Mann, *A Motive to Serve: Public Service Motivation in Human Resource Management and the Role of PSM in the Nonprofit Sector*, Public Personnel Management, Spring 2006, vol. 35, Iss. 1, pp. 33-48.

<sup>37</sup> Katherine C. Naff and John Crum, *Working for America: Does Public Service Motivation Make a Difference?*, Review of Public Personnel Administration, 1999, vol. 19, Iss. 4, pp. 5-16.

tools include programs that allow employees to better balance their work and family responsibilities (selected by 26 percent of respondents as one reason they applied for their job) as well as assignments to special projects. Agencies must also do all they can to ensure that the new hires receive high-quality supervision. Good supervisors can develop a work environment that will fully utilize the new hires' talents and keep them fully engaged in their work.

### **Government's Benefits and Pay**

While pay was also a reason for applying for Federal jobs, it ranked only ninth among the 16 items listed on the survey. As **Figure 6** shows, the Government's benefits were more likely to entice new hires to apply for a Federal job than was pay. Benefits, such as medical insurance and retirement coverage, have become an important employment consideration for an aging labor force. This is particularly true since retiree medical coverage is becoming less common in the private sector. Additionally, the number of private sector companies that provide defined benefit pension plans has declined in the last decade and, in many cases, these pension plans are less generous than the plan available to new Federal employees.<sup>38</sup> All of these things make the Government's benefit package, especially its retirement and health insurance coverage, a big draw, as this new hire wrote:

*"During the interview, 5 out of 6 interviewers indicated that I appeared to be over-qualified. Yet when the job offer was made, the salary offered was at the bottom of the salary range.... With a reduction of pay and [rate of] accrued leave, I accepted the job offer only because of the health care coverage."*

## **Strengths of Federal Employment**

To gauge the Government's ability to compete in the labor marketplace, we asked the new hires to compare their current Federal agencies with their last employer in 17 discrete areas. It is quite notable that, as shown in **Table 11**, the new hires rated their new Federal agencies better or the same than their last employers in most areas except dealing effectively with poor performers.<sup>39</sup> Notably, formerly self-employed new hires were especially critical of their agencies' dealings with poor performers.

**Table 11** shows that many upper level new hires view their agencies as better, not worse, than their former employers in important areas concerning the work itself,

<sup>38</sup> John A. McDonald, *Survey Finds Federal Workers Share Poor Retirement Planning With All Workers, but Have More Savings*, Employee Benefit Research Institute, vol. 27, No. 12, December 2006, pp. 2-7.

<sup>39</sup> Our survey did not define "dealing effectively with poor performers." It is likely that the new hires, based on their experience, such as in business, have a broader definition of "poor performer" to include marginal or even "average" employees and "dealing effectively" means removal. This definition may partly explain why agencies received the lowest mark on this item. In the Federal Government, however, an employee has to be rated unacceptable in one critical element in an approved performance plan to warrant removal.

not just the areas concerning the benefits of Federal employment. For example, many new hires rated their agencies better than their last employer in providing challenging work, and providing opportunities for training and development. A great many also saw the Government as better in giving them a chance to make a difference and treating employees with respect.

**Table 11. Upper Level New Hires' Views Comparing Their Agencies and Last Employers (in Percent)**

Areas	My Current Agency Is...			
	Better	About the Same	Worse	Not Sure/Don't Know
Job security	60	34	3	4
Workplace flexibility (e.g., telework, alternative work schedule)	44	36	15	5
Chance to make a difference	42	45	9	4
Opportunities for training and development	41	40	16	4
Retirement program	40	33	20	6
Opportunities for advancement	38	35	17	10
Leave benefits (annual, sick and holidays)	36	28	35	1
Pay	33	34	32	1
Challenging work	32	58	9	1
Quality of managers/supervisors	29	56	12	3
Treating employees with respect	29	60	8	2
Physical work environment/conditions	25	61	13	1
Using employees' skills and abilities effectively	24	57	15	4
Ethical practices	24	69	2	5
Quality of co-workers	21	68	10	2
Providing feedback on performance	21	58	15	6
Dealing effectively with poor performers	7	36	42	15

Source: MSPB Upper Level New Hires Survey, question 17a-q.

The new hires' ratings on leave benefits and pay were mixed. In pay, where we expected Federal agencies to do poorly, many new hires indicated that Government pay is either better (33 percent) or about the same (34 percent); only 32 percent said it is worse. Former private sector employees (who were not previously Federal contractors) as well as previously self-employed new hires were more likely to say Federal pay is worse (45 percent and 67 percent, respectively). Not surprisingly, many of the new hires who indicated that the Government's pay is worse joined the civil service for quality of life issues. That is, they entered Government service because they wanted less stressful work conditions or to better balance their work responsibilities and family needs. Also, how new hires viewed pay depended on their grade level. That is, new hires appointed at GS-12 were more likely to say the Government's pay was better than that of their last employers, while those at

GS-15 were more likely to say it was worse. This was not surprising. Many new hires at the GS-15 level were medical doctors who earned more in private practice or were supervisors and managers who commanded higher pay, especially if they had been in technical fields. However, they typically had to put in long hours in their former positions. Workplace flexibility can counterbalance lower pay, especially for people with family obligations. Therefore, it is in agencies' best interests to highlight their workplace flexibility programs in their vacancy announcements to attract highly qualified applicants who seek balance between their family needs and work responsibilities.

## Recruitment Incentives

The Federal Employees Pay Comparability Act of 1990 (FEPCA) established compensation flexibilities that were intended to enable agencies to compete for talent in a tight labor market. The Federal Workforce Flexibility Act of 2004 amended the flexibilities established by FEPCA and provided additional flexibilities that give agencies more tools to use to fill positions that would otherwise be difficult to fill. The compensation flexibilities permit agencies the authority to:

- Pay recruitment bonuses and relocation allowances.
- Set initial salary at a higher rate than the lowest rate for a given grade based on superior qualifications.
- Pay off some or all of the employee's student loan debt.
- Allow new employees to accrue leave at a higher rate by crediting directly related work experience gained elsewhere.

Perhaps because agencies were able to hire someone they wanted without incentives, or because of the stringent requirements for using these flexibilities, or because of limited funds, a majority of the upper level new hires in this study (64 percent) did not receive any of these incentives when hired. For those who did, the most common incentive was setting their starting pay above the minimum rate for the grade of the position based on superior qualifications (70 percent). A distant second was recruitment bonuses, which were given to 16 percent of the new hires. Moreover, perhaps because many of the upper level new hires may no longer have student loan debt, only a handful of the upper level new hires received the student loan debt relief incentive (3 percent).

At the time of the survey, the authority to credit outside experience for leave accrual purposes was newly implemented. Perhaps for this reason, only a few (5 percent) of the new hires were given this incentive. Judging from comments respondents wrote on their surveys, this benefit appears to be especially important to attract former military personnel, as this respondent wrote:

*“Stop ignoring the 20+ years served by retiring military when calculating leave. Going from 30 days per year to 13 is tough and not equitable. I work side by side with CIA civilians who got credit for their retired military time and earn 8 hours of leave per pay period! We constantly hear how the civilian ranks are losing experience. Changing this rule would attract more military retirees to the civilian ranks, bringing the 20+ years experience back to the Federal Government.”*

It appears that using hiring incentives to fill upper level positions can sometimes be critical, based on responses of our upper level new hires. When asked whether they would still accept the job had no incentives been offered, a majority (68 percent) of those who had received incentives said “No.” However, a significant minority (32 percent) said “Yes.” This 32 percent may indicate that incentives are an unnecessary expenditure in a tight budget era. Using hiring incentives is discretionary, meaning that agencies may offer them or not, but only in positions individual agencies deem hard to fill. When offered, the incentives are implemented based on the agency’s established recruitment incentive plan and must apply uniformly across the agency unless the head of the agency determines otherwise.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, it is important that when agencies develop their incentive plans they consider not only what they would like to accomplish by using these incentives, but equally important, the financial implications of the incentive plan.

## The Importance of Knowing Applicants’ Motivations

Survey data show that the Federal Government has strengths that can enable agencies to compete for highly qualified applicants for upper level jobs. For example, the Government has an advantage over other employers when it comes to job security. It has an excellent benefits package. Its pay can be competitive. It is seen as a place where people can find challenging work and can realize their potential. Overall, the positives outweigh the negatives. It is not surprising, therefore, that an overwhelming majority of the new hires (89 percent) intend to stay in Federal service, at least for the year following the survey. For those who intend to leave, the major reason they gave was that their talents were not being used effectively (82 percent). A distant second was that they felt they were bogged down by too much paperwork or red tape (59 percent).

What does this all mean to agencies? It means that agencies must be fully cognizant of the range and depth of the challenges they face in hiring highly qualified, diverse, upper level employees. These challenges are surmountable with carefully developed hiring strategies that capitalize on the strong attractions of Federal employment, the great variety and appeal of agencies’ missions, and the involvement of the right people in the many required steps in the recruitment process. Perhaps one of the most significant challenges is for agencies to be more creative and proactive

---

<sup>40</sup> 5 CFR 575.107(c).



## Why They Applied for Their Jobs

recruiters. For example, agencies need to attract not only the active but also the passive jobseekers through persuasive messages about the good things agencies have to offer, such as the Government's benefit package, the chance to serve the public, or the chance to make a difference. A second pressing challenge is for agencies to have a well-designed hiring program that maintains applicants' interest throughout the process, especially when the process is overly lengthy. Later in this report, we discuss in more detail the challenges and barriers supervisors and new hires faced during the hiring process.

# How They Were Assessed

Assessment is the phase in the hiring process during which the distinctions among applicants are made; i.e., whether they are qualified for the job and, if so, the extent to which they possess the knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) required to do the job. As part of its employment policy, the Government has to use assessment tools that are not discriminatory or affected by other nonmerit factors. These assessment tools must be practical and fairly test the capacity and fitness of applicants and should result in the selection of the best qualified candidates.<sup>41</sup> In addition, the Government is subject to the Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures, which require that assessment tools be valid (i.e., measure the competencies appropriate for the job being filled), reliable (i.e., consistent or stable in measuring a person's competence over time), free of bias, and fair to all applicants.<sup>42</sup>

## Meeting Minimum Qualification Requirements

Minimum qualification requirements are usually expressed in terms of education or years of experience needed to satisfactorily perform the duties of the position to be filled. Applicants for upper level jobs must meet the minimum qualification requirements for the job they applied for to receive further consideration. Applicants who are not found to have met minimum qualification requirements are rated not qualified and are dropped from the competition.

Each upper level professional and administrative position has a minimum qualification requirement. To be found minimally qualified, applicants must possess the level and type of education and the quantity of experience specified in OPM's qualification standards, and must meet any license requirements of those standards. For upper level positions, OPM's qualification standards require 1 year of specialized experience defined as "experience that is typically in or related to the work of the position being filled."<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> 5 C.F.R. § 300.102.

<sup>42</sup> U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, Civil Service Commission, Department of Labor and Department of Justice, *Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures*, Washington, DC, 1978.

<sup>43</sup> U.S. Office of Personnel Management, "Qualification Standards for General Schedule Positions: General Policies and Instructions," Part E.3. at <http://www.opm.gov/qualifications/SEC-II/s2-e1.asp>. Note: For research positions, a doctorate degree is qualifying at the GS-12 level. GS-13 and above research positions require at least 1 year of specialized experience equivalent to the next lower grade.

## **Evaluating Applicants for Minimum Qualifications**

In making minimum qualification determinations, the quality of the experience is as important as the amount of experience. OPM's qualifications standards require that specialized experience be equivalent to the next lower grade in level of difficulty and responsibility. For example, applicants for GS-12 must have 1 year of specialized experience equivalent to a GS-11. Making correct minimum qualification determinations entails a thorough knowledge of the qualification standards and the standards for classifying and grading Federal jobs.

Determining whether an applicant has the required minimum qualification is a complex, detailed task. Usually, human resources (HR) specialists make minimum qualification determinations. However, in some instances, agencies rely on applicants themselves to certify that they meet the minimum qualification standards. This practice is commonplace in agencies that use online assessments in which applicants self-certify that they possess the "1 year of specialized experience equivalent to the next lower grade." There is serious risk to this practice since applicants are seldom knowledgeable about qualifications or job grading standards. Furthermore, agencies sometimes fail to define or describe what they mean when they refer to "specialized experience equivalent to the next lower grade" in their vacancy announcements. An unexplained reference to this "specialized experience" may confuse applicants who do not understand the term. It is possible that qualified applicants can be eliminated from further consideration or unqualified applicants can certify themselves qualified and be referred for selection. Either situation is not acceptable; thus, human resources specialists need to at least review the applications and verify the ratings given to applicants who were found unqualified or who rated high enough to be referred for selection.

## **Using Selective Factors**

Agencies can make minimum qualification requirements more specific by including selective factors. OPM defines selective factor as "knowledge, skills, abilities, or special qualifications that are in addition to the minimum requirements in a qualification standard, but are determined to be essential to perform the duties and responsibilities of a particular position. Applicants who do not meet a selective factor are ineligible for further consideration."<sup>44</sup> Selective factors are helpful to include with the minimum qualification requirements when agencies need specific knowledge or skills that cannot be learned within a reasonable period of orientation in the job. For example, if facility in German is necessary to review and analyze documents written in German, it is appropriate to restrict competition to applicants fluent in this language. OPM's policies and instructions further state that "selective factors cannot (1) be so narrow that they preclude from consideration applicants who could perform the duties of the position, (2) require KSAs that could be learned readily during the normal period of orientation to the position, [or] (3) be so specific as to exclude from consideration applicants without prior Federal experience..."<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., Part E.6.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

Unfortunately, some agencies occasionally use selective factors that are inappropriate. The boxed example shows a selective factor for a Supervisory Information Technology Specialist, GS-14 vacancy posted on USAJOBS. Although the announcement was “open to the public,” the selective factor described clearly limits consideration to applicants who have experience providing information technology services for the Federal Government, such as employees of the Federal Government, Federal contractors, or military personnel. While other information technology specialists who have not provided such service for the Federal Government could conceivably qualify for the job, they would be eliminated from further consideration because they would not meet the minimum qualifications required. It is possible that the selective factor was just badly worded. Even so, the effect is the same: it inappropriately narrowed the minimum qualification requirements considerably.

**Example. Selective factor for a Supervisory Information Technology Specialist, GS-14 vacancy**

**QUALIFICATIONS REQUIRED:**

**Selective Factor:**

- Experience managing a staff supporting an enterprise data network, server platform and IT helpdesk for the Federal Government.

Agencies have the responsibility of finding the right candidates for their jobs. Sometimes, agencies may have to restrict competition to find the right candidates efficiently. But, agencies have to realize that there are consequences to their decision to restrict competition. Adding selective factors limits the pool of applicants who can qualify and, hence, the number of applicants from whom they may select. Selective factors can also become so inappropriately restrictive that they can eliminate qualified applicants from further competition, thereby undermining the principle of open competition. Thus, agencies should be very careful when they create restrictive minimum qualification requirements. Minimum qualification requirements (including selective factors) are the lowest bar every applicant must meet to be rated “qualified” for the position to be filled. They are not quality ranking factors that will identify who among the basically qualified applicants are likely to be “better qualified.” Minimum qualification requirements, therefore, should not create artificial barriers that could unnecessarily exclude applicants who are otherwise qualified to do the work.

## HR Staff Expertise and Managers' Involvement

HR specialists are the first guard in ensuring that agencies win the war for talent; but they can also be a barrier. Most of the occupations that are filled at the upper levels are highly specialized. Usually, HR specialists do the first evaluation of applicants' qualifications, which determines whether they meet OPM's minimum qualification standards. Many of the standards are broad and general, requiring HR specialists to exercise considerable judgment. For a variety of reasons, such as lack of training, inadequate guidance, or insufficient knowledge and understanding of the occupation, some HR specialists make erroneous determinations about minimum qualifications, as these new hires can attest:

*"...[S]everal times I was assessed by HR personnel as not qualified at a level for a position for which I was well-qualified. When I inquired why, I was informed that the HR staff was either new or didn't understand the position. This type of issue will turn well-qualified applicants off because they are treated better by non-Government recruiters who respect the time of these applicants.*

*Qualification review process needs work. I applied for a GS-7 (in my retired military career field) and came up not qualified; but then I applied for a GS-12 (same field) and came up qualified. This is the job I have now. Make sense to anyone?"*

To be fair, HR specialists are attempting to do complex work under trying circumstances. HR offices lost many of their senior specialists during the downsizing of the 1990s, and this expertise has not yet been fully restored. Problems such as the ones just described can happen. To minimize erroneous minimum qualification determinations, HR can solicit assistance from subject-matter experts or input from supervisors or other selecting officials who can make better minimum qualification determinations, especially for highly technical jobs.

The HR staff members are not the only ones responsible for making the hiring process a success. Also responsible are the supervisors and managers who need their upper level jobs filled. Yet, some supervisors do not get involved in the hiring process, before and during selection. **Table 12** shows that, while the majority of supervisors were personally involved in the many phases of hiring their new upper level employees, a significant minority were not involved during the pre-selection phase. Additionally, some 21 percent of supervisors indicated they did not select (or recommend the selection of) their new hire.

**Table 12. Extent Supervisors Agree or Disagree They Were Personally Involved in The Following Tasks (in Percent)**

Tasks	Agree	Disagree
Developing the assessment tools/rating instruments used to identify the best qualified applicant	79	12
Reviewing applications	91	6
Interviewing applicants	90	6
Checking references	78	12

*Note: "Neither agree nor disagree" responses are not shown.*

*Source: MSPB Supervisory Upper Level New Hires Survey, question 13i.*

Supervisory involvement is crucial in hiring new employees with the right talent. For example, of the supervisors who were involved in developing the assessment tools used to identify the best qualified applicant, 98 percent said they got the talent they need to accomplish their mission. For supervisors who were not involved, the percentage went down to 82 percent. Supervisors' involvement in reviewing applications, interviewing applicants, or checking references revealed similar trends. In sum, supervisors who were involved in the pre-selection phases of the hiring process were more likely to have a positive view of their hiring decisions than those who were not involved.



# Barriers and Challenges Encountered by Supervisors and New Hires

Finding someone with the right technical experience was the number one challenge supervisors of upper level new hires said they faced when they hired their new employee. This is consistent with results from MSPB's Governmentwide Merit Principles Survey (MPS) conducted in 2005. Supervisors responding to the MPS indicated that the greatest obstacle they faced when hiring employees was the shortage of qualified applicants.<sup>46</sup> Because most vacant positions at the upper level grades are highly specialized, and many are hard to fill, it is expected that many supervisors will find it challenging to find applicants with the right kind of skill. Unfortunately, the way agencies recruit and assess applicants may contribute to this difficulty.

## Length of the Hiring Process

The length of the hiring process is one major complaint of new hires and supervisors alike. Many supervisors (45 percent) indicated that the lengthy hiring process is their main concern when hiring their new employee. This is understandable: when a position is vacant, supervisors face difficulty in completing assigned tasks, which ultimately can adversely affect mission accomplishment.

For about half (46 percent) of the new hires, it took less than 2 months from the time they applied until they received their job offers. For a third of the new hires, it took 3 to 4 months, while the rest waited for 5 months or more. Comparing their Federal experience with their experience with their last employer, 75 percent of the new hires indicated that it took longer to be hired for their current civil service jobs than it did for their previous position. Because applicants for positions like the ones filled by our respondents have work experience that they can sell somewhere else, making them wait without a reasonable explanation could result in agencies' losing them, as this new hire wrote:

*"The hiring process can be simpler and quicker. I had other offers from the private sector that were finalized about 1-2 weeks from when they initially talked to me on the phone! I preferred to work for the Federal*

---

<sup>46</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *Accomplishing Our Mission: Results of the Merit Principles Survey 2005*, Washington, DC, February 2007, p. 14.



*Government, but it took [the agency] about 4 months to get me an offer! I was extremely close to giving up working for the Federal Government because I just couldn't afford to wait any longer. Then, when I finally got the Government's job offer, I couldn't start for another 3-4 weeks. I had to wait for the beginning of the next pay period to actually start work. I'm sure the Government is missing out on well-experienced and great employees because of the problems I described above.”<sup>47</sup>*

About half (47 percent) of the new hires agreed that the time it took from application to job offer was reasonable. However, this view was affected by how soon they got the job offers. The sooner they got the job offer, the more likely they were to think that the timeliness of the hiring process was reasonable (see **Table 13**). Of those who got their job offer in less than a month, an overwhelming majority agreed the time was reasonable. Although a majority of new hires still thought a wait of 1 to 2 months was reasonable, the percentage dropped dramatically after 2 months.

Time From Application to Job Offer	Percent Who Agreed Time was Reasonable
<1 month	91
1-2 months	66
3-4 months	33
5-6 months	15
>6 months	10

Source: MSPB Upper Level New Hires Survey, question 12c

Unfortunately, the long wait does not necessarily end with the job offer. After the job offer, there are often pre-employment requirements that still need to be completed before the selected candidate reports to work. Some upper level positions may only require a limited record check, which does not preclude the selectee from reporting to work. But, for other positions, such as intelligence or security management, whose selectees may have access to sensitive information, a security clearance must be completed before they can begin work. A full background check for a security clearance can take months to complete. Thus, applicants with security clearances (or updatable clearances), such as former military members, can have a great advantage in selection. Fortunately, OPM, the agency responsible for conducting most of the Government's background investigations, reports that it has reduced the time in which it adjudicates requests for background checks.<sup>48</sup> This improvement should help speed up the time before the employee can begin work.

<sup>47</sup> There are no regulatory prohibitions to appointing new employees other than at the start of a pay period. When all preappointment requirements have been met, requiring a new employee to wait until the start of a new pay period is an unnecessary administrative practice that lengthens the hiring process.

<sup>48</sup> U.S. Office of Personnel Management news release, "OPM Leads by Example, Improving Timeliness of Internal Security Clearances," Mar. 2, 2007.

The waiting period cannot be eliminated entirely. However, agencies can minimize the frustration of waiting and the possibility of dropouts by keeping applicants informed of the status of their application. A cost-effective way to keep applicants informed is a short phone call, e-mail, or post card from HR or the hiring organization updating them of their status as they move through the process. These simple devices can add a personal touch to a very impersonal process and can keep applicants interested in and committed to getting the job. In addition, selecting officials can help speed up the process, as this new hire wrote:

*“I found my hiring experience to be very good and very speedy. I think what made the process so good was having a motivated supervisor who wanted to get the position filled quickly. By not taking a long time to schedule interviews and make the hiring decision, potential hires don’t have to wait so long and there is less risk of accepting a different job.”*

While an attitude of “If we post it, they will come” may work for some positions, it is highly unlikely that it will work if coupled with poor HR customer service, which is happening more often than many would like to admit. In a 2000 study of the job search experiences of new hires, MSPB found that feedback on the status of their application was late or nonexistent.<sup>49</sup> A majority of our upper level new hires had the same experience. When asked whether they had been informed of the status of their applications other than being called for interviews and offered their jobs, 56 percent said “No.” It appears that the quality of customer service as applied to job applicants has not improved since our 2000 report in which we called agencies’ attention to the need to treat applicants as customers in accord with agencies’ customer service standards. Agencies were cautioned that in times of fierce competition for good workers, they cannot afford to cut corners in their recruiting efforts.<sup>50</sup> That caution is reiterated here. Some new hires in the present study warned that agencies could lose good candidates by failing to provide feedback. High applicant dropout rates can significantly reduce the pool of qualified applicants.

Despite the challenges, agency leadership must ensure that they have an adequate number of knowledgeable specialists. Numerous studies have pointed out the need to improve the quality of HR systems and of HR specialists who work within those systems.<sup>51</sup> The HR specialist is often the first face that applicants see when they apply for Federal jobs. Their expertise and professionalism can draw in or repel potential applicants.

---

<sup>49</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *Competing for Federal Jobs: Job Search Experiences of New Hires*, Washington, DC, February 2000, p. 14.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>51</sup> See U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board reports, *Reforming Federal Hiring: Beyond Faster and Cheaper*, July 2006; *Federal Personnel Offices: Time for Change?*, August 1993; and *Help Wanted: A Review of Federal Vacancy Announcements*, April 2003. See also the National Academy of Public Administration, *A Competency Model for Human Resources Professionals*, Washington, DC, June 1996; and U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Human Capital: Federal Workforce Challenges in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, GAO-07-556T, Mar. 6, 2007.

## Complexity of the Application Process

With each agency being responsible for its own hiring, each agency has established its own application process. Thus, there is no standard way to apply for Federal jobs, making it complex and frustrating for applicants to pursue multiple job opportunities. For example, some agencies ask applicants to submit their applications electronically, others by mail or facsimile. Some agencies accept applications through USAJOBS, while others only accept applications submitted through their own Web sites. Additionally, some agencies ask applicants to submit written descriptions of their knowledge, skills and abilities, while other agencies ask applicants to respond to occupational questionnaires online. With such a variety of application methods, often with differing requirements, applicants often find the application process complex, confusing and burdensome. Even more regrettable, much of the complexity of agencies’ application and hiring processes is self-inflicted. All too often, agencies create steps that can unnecessarily complicate and cause delays in the hiring process, as this supervisor wrote:

*“The Federal hiring process is too complicated. My organization’s has more than 60 steps: 45 are OPM required; 15 are my agency’s. Some take a week to complete. No one seems to care as they think nothing of adding an extra step.... I enclose a check-list of the possible steps in our hiring process, which usually takes 6 to 15 months to complete.”*

A burdensome and complicated application process can discourage potential applicants from applying for Federal jobs. When asked whether they did not pursue applying for some jobs they were interested in, 39 percent of new hires said “Yes.”

<b>Reasons</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Had to write/re-write descriptions of my knowledge, skills and abilities	32
I decided I was not qualified or a strong candidate	23
Had to re-write or re-format my résumé	22
I learned there was someone lined up for the job	22
Had to respond to a lengthy questionnaire	18
Required too much of my time	13
Off-putting vacancy announcements	9
HR wasn’t helpful when asked for more information	8
Had to submit supporting documentation	4

Source: MSPB Upper Level New Hires Survey, question 11b.

There are various reasons why applicants give up applying for Federal jobs. As **Table 14** shows, the most common reason for upper level new hires to give up is the requirement to write or re-write narratives describing their knowledge, skills and abilities. Agencies generally require descriptions for multiple KSAs. Even online questionnaires can include multiple essay questions that can become too long, thus defeating the purpose of “automation.” Whether they are to be done online or on paper, the writing and rewriting of KSAs can become burdensome when done and redone for every job of interest, as was the case for this new hire who did not pursue other Federal jobs he or she would have liked to apply for:

*“Required too much of my time—this is compounded by the numerous stovepiped processes found in each agency—takes too long to fill out individual résumés and KSAs for each agency, each job.”*

MSPB understands that writing essays in response to the required KSAs takes time and serious effort from applicants. However, to conduct a fair and effective evaluation of applicants’ qualifications, agencies have to have detailed information about applicants’ KSAs. Unfortunately, agencies sometimes get carried away, requiring write-ups for far too many KSAs, of which many are too closely related. For example, one vacancy announcement posted “open to the public” required applicants to give “a complete and detailed answer” to any of the 14 “yes/no” questions they responded to affirmatively. Out of the 14 questions, 9 were related to supervision or management of subordinate staff. In an attempt to elicit more substantive information to ensure a good assessment, the agency failed to consider the burden its questions placed on applicants who responded to some or all of the related questions affirmatively. Agencies have the responsibility to make good assessments and to require interested applicants to submit the necessary information. However, they should balance their need for good assessment with the need to reduce the burden they place on applicants where possible. Agencies should realize that they might attract many more highly qualified applicants if jobseekers find that the application process is not unreasonably burdensome.



# Conclusions and Recommendations

The Federal Government, as the largest employer in the Nation, hires a substantial number of new employees every year. The majority of the new hires are GS-11 and below. However, the Government also hires a substantial number of new employees at the GS-12 to -15 levels, often to staff new programs, to obtain new skills, or to fill skills gaps. These upper level new hires are the senior specialists, analysts, managers, or supervisors who have critical roles in the effective and efficient operation of Government. They are usually experts in their fields and are highly sought after by the Government and by other employers.

**The hiring of new employees at the upper level grades has been increasing, especially in recent years.** There are a variety of reasons for the increase, but this study shows that the most influential have been changes in the Government's priorities and missions, such as homeland security and national defense, and the public's increasing demands for more complex services. Thus, there has been an increasing demand to hire individuals with expertise in certain areas, such as information technology, security, logistics, medicine and law. This trend of increased upper level hiring is likely to continue. The Federal workforce is aging and many of those who are or will become eligible to retire in the next decade will leave the civil service. Because hiring freezes during the early 1990s curtailed entry-level hiring and led to the shortage of qualified applicants in the internal pipeline, the Government will need to fill skills gaps through outside hiring.

**The main sources of new upper level hires have been former employees of Federal contractors and military members.** Their experience in areas related to information technology, homeland security and national defense has made former employees of Federal contractors and military members good candidates for upper level positions in these areas. Furthermore, the VEOA, the special program created to hire former military members, has had a significant effect on the hiring of former military members for upper level jobs.

**Overall, upper level new hires have tended to be predominantly male and nonminority.** Various factors have affected the composition of upper level new hires. These include the types of upper level positions the Government has filled, which are often dictated by the Government's priorities and missions. Many of these positions are typically male-dominated. Another factor has been the increased hiring of former military members through the VEOA. Former military officers, the most likely group to qualify for upper level jobs based on their education, training and leadership experience, are predominantly male and

nonminority. Without increased efforts by agencies to hire more women and minority veterans—especially Hispanic veterans—at the upper levels, it will be difficult for these groups to achieve parity at these grade levels. This is not an indictment of special programs meant to hire veterans because these programs serve an important purpose, but a consequence that needs to be addressed in agency strategic recruitment plans.

**The Federal Government can compete for talent.** There is no doubt that the Government is faced with strong competition to get the talent it needs for its upper level jobs, but it can successfully compete. Many upper level new hires have a favorable view of the Government, although this positive view may reflect both their desire for Federal employment in general and their success in landing a Federal job. Even so, survey data show that the Federal Government has great strengths that should enable agencies to compete for highly qualified applicants for upper level jobs. For example, many upper level new hires indicate that the Government has an advantage over other employers when it comes to job security. They also indicate that the Government has an excellent benefits package that is becoming more important to mature workers. Often, new hires view pay as competitive when considered in the context of the benefits that are offered. They also see the Government as a place where people can find challenging work and realize their potential. New hires also think that it is a place that offers more opportunities for development and advancement. Overall, new hires view the Government quite positively as an employer. Unfortunately, many of the good things are overshadowed by a variety of issues that need to be resolved.

**Generally, agencies lack a comprehensive strategy for attracting highly skilled applicants.** Based on our study results, agencies do not use a variety of recruiting tools to attract a diverse pool of qualified applicants. Although the most common challenge supervisors encounter when hiring upper level employees is the scarcity of applicants with the right skills, seldom do agencies use a range of recruitment tools available to them, relying instead on USAJOBS to advertise their vacant jobs. However, our findings show that USAJOBS is not the primary source of job information for upper level new hires. Many more of the survey participants used their network of friends, relatives and their now current supervisors and co-workers to learn about Federal job opportunities. Although word-of-mouth is an effective tool, it can have a limited reach that may not ensure a diverse pool of qualified applicants.

**Agencies sometimes unnecessarily add selective factors to the minimum qualification requirements.** Applicants for upper level jobs must meet minimum qualification requirements that OPM prescribes for each position. Agencies may sometimes add selective factors to the minimum qualifications to restrict competition to those applicants who have the knowledge, skills, abilities and special requirements to perform satisfactorily on the job. Unfortunately, agencies sometimes use narrow selective factors that unnecessarily limit the pool of applicants who can qualify for the job, thus inadvertently undermining the principle of open competition.

**There are barriers to hiring.** Based on the responses of the supervisors we surveyed, finding someone with the right technical experience is the number one challenge supervisors face when hiring upper level employees. For some upper level jobs, such as healthcare professionals, there is a shortage of qualified personnel throughout the industry; hence, finding qualified applicants is naturally difficult. However, in some occupations, the “shortage” may be influenced by how the hiring is conducted. For example, new hires and supervisors alike noted the considerable amount of time it takes to be hired or to fill a vacancy. For many applicants with skills that they can sell somewhere else, waiting 3 months or more for a job is simply not an option. Keeping applicants informed of the status of their application as it slowly moves along the process can help. Unfortunately, many applicants do not get any feedback at all.

The complexity of the hiring process also unnecessarily frustrates applicants. Hoped-for improvements resulting from the use of technology have been slow to materialize. Application requirements that take too much time to complete are a major complaint. Because agencies do not use a single process, applicants can spend a considerable amount of time applying for the same type of job with different agencies.

Another problem with current hiring efforts is agencies’ passive approach to recruiting applicants for upper level jobs. Many upper level positions are highly technical and/or hard to fill. Even so, the survey results suggest that agencies use the same recruiting strategy to fill upper level jobs that they use to fill lower level jobs.

It is clear that there are aspects in the hiring of upper level employees that need improvement. This study on the hiring of upper level employees has identified many of the same weaknesses that MSPB has identified in numerous studies we have conducted over the years.<sup>52</sup> For example, complexity of the application process and lack of a comprehensive recruitment strategy are problems that come up regularly in these studies. Many of these problems or barriers can be resolved without regulatory or statutory changes. Agencies can make necessary improvements on their own to ensure that they attract and select high-quality upper level employees.

To improve the hiring of upper level new employees and ensure that the civil service has the highly qualified diverse workforce it needs, MSPB offers the following recommendations.

---

<sup>52</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *Reforming Federal Hiring: Beyond Faster and Cheaper*, Washington, DC, September 2006. This report summarizes findings and recommendations of numerous studies on Federal hiring that MSPB has conducted over the years.



### **Agencies Should:**

1. Develop a hiring strategy to fill upper level jobs that uses a comprehensive recruiting plan that—
  - Does not limit public notice to USAJOBS. Recruitment efforts should include other announcement and publicity tools to attract a diverse pool of qualified applicants with the skills and expertise agencies need.
  - Does more to highlight their missions in vacancy announcements and ads to appeal to potential applicants who have the passion and personal commitment to their agencies' missions.
  - Includes job marketing programs that emphasize positives that are important to people whom they want to attract. For example, the new hires indicated that they would have accepted their job offers even with a reduction in pay because of the Government's workplace flexibilities and benefits package, so these should be stressed.
  - Includes well written vacancy announcements.
2. Improve their assessment methods by—
  - Avoiding the use of restrictive selective factors that do not enhance minimum qualification requirements to screen applicants.
  - Ensuring that automated questionnaires are not so long that they become burdensome, defeating the purpose of "automation." Agencies should also ensure the accuracy of online assessment ratings by at least verifying the lack of qualifications of those who were rated unqualified and/or verifying the quality of experience of candidates who may be referred for selection before giving a certified list of candidates to the selecting supervisor.
3. Involve the supervisor (or other selecting officials) in the pre-selection phases of the hiring process—determining the hiring authorities or methods to be used, recruiting, developing assessment tools, and assessing qualifications.
4. Continuously review their application process and eliminate steps that do not add value. Agencies should endeavor to review applications and assess qualifications in a timely manner to minimize the time applicants have to wait for hiring decisions.
5. Ensure that the human resources staffs responsible for recruiting applicants for upper level positions provide some meaningful feedback to job applicants. Feedback, which puts some personal touch to an impersonal process, can help maintain applicants' interest throughout a hiring process that can be lengthy at times.

# Appendix. PATCOB Definitions

**Professional** work requires knowledge in a field of science or learning characteristically acquired through education or training equivalent to a bachelor's or higher degree with major study in or pertinent to the specialized field, as distinguished from general education. Work is professional when it requires the exercise of discretion, judgment and personal responsibility for the application of an organized body of knowledge that is constantly studied to make new discoveries and interpretations, and to improve data, materials, and methods, e.g., mathematics or engineering.<sup>53</sup>

**Administrative** work involves the exercise of analytical ability, judgment, discretion and personal responsibility, and the application of a substantial body of knowledge of principles, concepts and practices applicable to one or more fields of administration or management. While these positions do not require specialized education, they do involve the type of skills (analytical, research, writing, judgment) typically gained through a college level education, or through progressively responsible experience.

**Technical** work is typically associated with and supportive of a professional or administrative field. It involves extensive practical knowledge, gained through experience and/or specific training less than that represented by college graduation. Work in these occupations may involve substantial elements of the work of the professional or administrative field, but requires less than full knowledge of the field involved.

**Clerical** occupations involve structured work in support of office, business, or fiscal operations. Clerical work is performed in accordance with established policies, procedures, or techniques; and requires training, experience, or working knowledge related to the tasks to be performed. Clerical occupational series follow a one-grade interval pattern.

**Other white-collar occupations.** There are some occupations in the General Schedule that do not clearly fit into one of the above groupings. Included among these are series such as the Fire Protection and Prevention Series, GS-081 and Police Series, GS-083. These occupations are collectively called "Other White-Collar."

**Blue-collar** are occupations whose paramount requirements are trades, crafts and labor experience and knowledge.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> This definition and that of the other white-collar occupations came from the U.S. Office of Personnel Management, "Introduction to the Position Classification Standards," TS-134, July 1995. This document can be found at <http://www.opm.gov/fedclass/gsinintro.pdf>.

<sup>54</sup> This definition came from the U.S. Office of Personnel Management, "Introduction to the Federal Wage System Job Grading System," TS-44, September 1981. The document can be found at <http://www.opm.gov/fedclass/fwsintro.pdf>.

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

---

OFFICIAL BUSINESS  
PENALTY FOR PRIVATE USE \$300

PRST STD  
US POSTAGE PAID  
WASHINGTON, DC  
PERMIT NO. G-113

## **In Search of Highly Skilled Workers**

*A Study on the Hiring of Upper-Level Employees  
from Outside the Federal Government*