

U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board

Research Agenda

2022–2026



September 2022

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Introduction

The U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) has the statutory responsibility to conduct objective, non-partisan studies that assess and evaluate Federal merit system policies, operations, and practices. *See* 5 U.S.C. § 1204(a)(3). Our studies are typically Governmentwide in scope and take a long-term perspective on merit and effective management of the Federal workforce. The prospective nature of the studies function, in conjunction with MSPB’s adjudication of individual appeals and its authority to review human resources (HR) regulations, enables MSPB to fulfill its role as guardian of Federal merit systems and ensure the workforce is managed in accordance with the merit system principles (MSPs) and free from prohibited personnel practices (PPPs).

This document outlines topics of study for MSPB’s Office of Policy and Evaluation (OPE) over the next 4 years. It has three sections:

1. A description of the research agenda development and organization;
2. A list of proposed research topics by category; and
3. A list and description of the 44 research topics included in the 2022–2026 research agenda.

Research Agenda Development and Organization

Development

The development process comprised several steps, following the general process used for previous research agendas. Those steps included:

- Solicitation of issues and ideas from stakeholders, the general public, and MSPB staff;
- Compilation and review of stakeholder and public input;
- Review of previous MSPB research and research agendas;
- Three staff workshops to discuss and evaluate research ideas;
- Preparation of topic descriptions and possible lines of research and inquiry;
- Final review and examination of topics and descriptions before submission to MSPB Board members; and
- Review and approval by MSPB Board members.

OPE evaluated research ideas using the four criteria outlined below.

Criterion	Question
Centrality	Is the topic consistent with MSPB’s mission as guardian of Federal merit systems, particularly promoting MSPs and preventing PPPs?
Timeliness	Could a report on this topic inform or drive change in Federal workforce policy or management? Would MSPB research and findings unnecessarily duplicate the work of other organizations that also study the Federal workforce?
Ambition	Does the study address a merit system issue, or an aspect of workforce management, that is overlooked or not well understood?
Practicality	Does MSPB have the resources and expertise needed to make a meaningful contribution on the topic, by informing debate, shaping policy, or improving understanding and practice?

Organization

The proposed research agenda comprises 44 topics organized into six categories, as follows:

- Defending Merit—topics related to principles, issues, or practices that are fundamental to a merit system;
- Building an Effective Workforce—topics on the nature of work, workforce capacity, or selected segments of the workforce;
- Recruitment and Hiring—topics related to how employees are recruited, assessed, and selected;
- Pay and Performance Management—topics related to employee compensation and performance;
- Supervision and Leadership—topics related to the selection and management of leaders, and the practice of leadership or management; and
- Focus on the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM)—topics related to roles and initiatives of the Federal Government’s central personnel agency.

The research agenda is a list of topics that appear most promising and timely for MSPB study in the next 4 years. The topics are broadly defined. A topic may cover a single study or several, which may be consecutive (building on each other) or concurrent (looking at discrete issues). The table below lists the topics by category. A description of each topic and associated lines of inquiry follows.

As in the past, the proposed agenda contains more topics than OPE will be able to study, given current staffing and resource levels. Topics that remain will be considered for the following research agenda. It should also be kept in mind that the agenda is not exhaustive. Studies on a new topic may be initiated on OPE or Board recommendation at our discretion or at the suggestion of our stakeholders to address evolving policy on the management of the Federal workforce.

Board Priorities

In reviewing research agenda topics, the Board members identified and agreed on 20 priority items. These items are denoted by (*) below and will receive expedited attention in the work planning process as OPE considers staff capacity, capability, and available resources.

Current Projects Underway

Pending Board member confirmations, OPE began work on several projects in anticipation of the members' arrival. These projects are denoted by (†) below.

Proposed Research Topics by Category

Defending Merit

1. The Merit System Principles—A Health Check * †
2. Preventing and Redressing Prohibited Personnel Practices * †
3. Sexual Harassment in the Federal Workplace: A Progress Report * †
4. Civil Service Employee Protections *
5. Protecting Whistleblowers in Law and Practice *
6. Fair and Equitable Treatment in the Federal Workforce: An Update *
7. Modernizing Federal Personnel Systems *
8. Aggression and Violence in the Federal Workplace †
9. Beyond KSAs—Employment Requirements and Their Implications
10. Individual Values Differences in the Workplace

Building an Effective Workforce

1. Aligning Workplace Flexibilities with the Future of Work *
2. How Does Technology Affect the Work of Federal Employees? *
3. Workforce Restructuring Rules and Merit-Based Principles *
4. HR Technology—Possibilities and Practices *
5. Preparing the HR Workforce for the Present and Future †
6. Identifying and Filling Employee Skills Gaps
7. Work at the Leading Edge—Recruiting and Managing the STEMM Workforce
8. A Closer Look at Employee Retention
9. Creating a Culture of Engagement to Drive Performance and Mission Success
10. An Evaluation of Traditional Workplace Benefit Programs

Recruitment and Hiring

1. Fair and Open Competition—Practices and Challenges *
2. How Do Hiring Officials Decide Who Gets the Job? *
3. Are Federal Vacancy Announcements Accurate and Effective? †

4. Hiring Authorities: Is Quantity Producing Quality?
5. Direct-Hire Authority
6. School-to-Service and the Pathways Programs
7. Reforming Federal Hiring
8. Recruitment—Attracting and Sourcing Candidates
9. Federal Job Applicants—Experiences and Insights
10. Applicant Assessment—Using the Right Tools for the Job
11. Selection Panels: Multiple Perspectives for Assessment

Pay and Performance Management

1. The Probationary Period: Ensuring Employees Meet Standards for Retention *
2. Correcting Employee Performance and Conduct *
3. Position Classification in the 21st Century
4. Federal Pay Systems: Experience Outside the General Schedule
5. Performance Appraisal Policies, Applications, and Systems
6. Achieving the Multiple Goals of Performance Feedback
7. Improving and Recognizing Employee Performance

Supervision and Leadership

1. Selection and Management of Federal Supervisors *
2. Understanding the Roles of Teams and Team Leaders *
3. Dual Career Paths for Supervisors and Technical Specialists *
4. Management of the Senior Executive Service

Focus on OPM

1. OPM Oversight of Delegated Authorities and Responsibilities *
2. The Role of a Central Human Resources Authority *

Defending Merit

1. The Merit System Principles—A Health Check * †

The merit system principles and the prohibited personnel practices provide standards and core values for the management of the Federal civil service. Using a survey of Federal supervisors and subordinate employees, this study would examine the degree to which agencies protect the MSPs at both the work unit and organizational levels. This study would build on measures introduced in the 2013 MSPB report *Managing Public Employees in the Public Interest* to develop a balanced scorecard of Federal agency adherence to the MSPs (“merit system health”). Research questions to be answered may include:

- To what extent do employees believe their supervisors and their organizations observe the MSPs? Where are the strengths and weaknesses?
- How do the perceptions of supervisors and subordinates differ?
- What factors are associated with higher levels of “merit system health”?
- How do perceptions of merit system health relate to outcomes such as employee engagement, turnover and intention to quit, and indicators of organizational performance?

2. Preventing and Redressing Prohibited Personnel Practices * †

The Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 (CSRA) and subsequent legislation prohibits 14 personnel practices as they are contrary to a merit-based system and damaging to organizational productivity, employee morale, and the public interest. Past MSPB research has examined the perceived incidence of PPPs and looked more closely at issues and practices related to specific PPPs. Future MSPB research, on collective or individual PPPs, might examine topics such as:

- Employee perceptions of the prevalence of PPPs.
- The role of agency culture and policy in preventing and redressing PPPs.
- Education of employees and job applicants regarding the PPPs and procedures to report—or seek redress for—a perceived PPP.
- How the Federal Government is structured to prevent, investigate, and redress PPPs.
- Challenges in preventing particular PPPs (such as the manipulation of recruitment actions to favor a particular individual) and how those challenges can be addressed.
- The steps agencies have taken to change policies, processes, or culture after they have been found by MSPB to be in violation of a PPP.

3. Sexual Harassment in the Federal Workplace: A Progress Report * †

MSPB has studied sexual harassment in the Federal workplace since 1980. MSPB last collected data in 2016, preceding the 2017 #MeToo movement and the resulting renewed attention to sexual harassment. That attention—and the 2016 data showing that sexual harassment remains an all-too-common occurrence—may have prompted Federal agencies to update their policies and preventive efforts. This study would follow up on prior research to examine questions such as:

- Has the prevalence of sexual harassment behaviors changed?
- Are Federal employees more knowledgeable about sexual harassment and their employers' related policies and practices?
- Have employees who experience or observe sexual harassment become more likely to respond actively to discourage the behavior?
- What actions have Federal agencies taken to prevent and address sexual harassment?
- How do agencies create a workplace culture that is free of harassment, ensures that allegations of harassment are taken seriously, and educates the workforce about what actions are or are not acceptable?

4. Civil Service Employee Protections *

Federal employees are managed under civil service authorities and processes established in law (e.g., the Pendleton Act and the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978) that attempt to defend against political patronage and ensure that the civil service is merit-based. These processes and protections, such as open competition for jobs and due process rights, have been perceived as increasing the time and effort required to hire and fire Federal employees. As a result, they have come under scrutiny in recent years.

This research would look at the advantages and disadvantages of civil service protections, including questions such as:

- What are these civil service protections?
- How did they come about?
- What benefits do they provide the Federal Government as an employer and the American people as stakeholders?
- What are the drawbacks to providing these protections?
- Is there a better way to balance fairness with efficiency?

5. Protecting Whistleblowers in Law and Practice *

The CSRA expressly prohibited retaliation for whistleblowing. Since then, civil service law has been repeatedly amended or augmented to better encourage employees to report wrongdoing and protect those who do. Our reports, *Whistleblower Protections for Federal Employees* and *Blowing the Whistle: Barriers to Federal Employees Making Disclosures*, discussed current law and employee perceptions of their ability to blow the whistle. Subsequent changes to law have addressed management of the supervisory workforce to support whistleblowing, expanded an employee's right to refuse to commit wrongdoing, broadened the definition of whistleblowing, and specified consequences for reprisal.

This study could explore:

- How the law operates to: (1) encourage disclosures of wrongdoing; (2) prevent retaliation; (3) provide redress when retaliation occurs; and (4) assign specific responsibilities to the head of an agency to prevent and redress retaliation;
- Agency culture and employee perceptions of: (1) the frequency of wrongdoing; (2) attitudes towards whistleblowers; (3) how whistleblower protections work; and (4) the effectiveness of whistleblower protections; and

- Potential areas of improvement to law, regulation, or agency practice.

6. Fair and Equitable Treatment in the Federal Workforce: An Update *

The merit system principles state that Federal agencies shall recruit “qualified individuals...to achieve a work force from all segments of society,” select and advance employees “on the basis of relative ability, knowledge, and skills after fair and open competition,” and ensure that all employees receive “fair and equitable treatment in all aspects of personnel management.” Previous MSPB research has assessed the Government’s success in meeting these standards, concluding that progress has been made, but challenges remain. Study in this area would build on previous research to review progress in both workforce composition (e.g., the representation and advancement of historically underrepresented groups) and management (e.g., whether employees believe they are being treated fairly). Using workforce data, survey data, and focus groups, research would explore questions such as:

- To what extent is the Federal workforce representative of “all segments of society”? How does the Federal Government compare to U.S. civilian labor force?
- How does representation differ by grade, occupation, and responsibilities (e.g., entry-level vs. decision-making levels)?
- How have workforce demographics and representation changed, particularly at higher levels of pay and responsibility?
- What have Federal agencies done to achieve a diverse workforce? What has worked, and what has not? What factors aid or impede progress?
- How do work experiences differ across demographic and occupational lines, in formal terms (e.g., promotions, awards, training, and discipline) and perceptual terms (e.g., engagement and inclusion)?
- How do Federal employees view the Government’s personnel practices? What contributes to employee perceptions of unfairness or misuse of personnel authority, and what measures could improve decision making and address those perceptions?
- What systemic issues exist that perpetuate inequities across the workforce?
- How does a more diverse Federal workforce affect equality of access, procedural fairness, and equal treatment for those needing Government services?

7. Modernizing Federal Personnel Systems *

Although workforce management in most Federal agencies is governed by Title 5 of the U.S. Code, there are exceptions. Some are broad; others are specific, to enable agencies to tailor HR strategies or policies to particular requirements while remaining merit-based. Some examples include classification (e.g., pay-banding systems); recruitment (e.g., medical positions in the Department of Veterans Affairs); and compensation and benefits (e.g., several financial regulatory agencies and Government corporations).

These exceptions have parallels in state and local governments. Some have pursued incremental improvements to HR policies and practices, while others have reconsidered the nature and scope of career employment and career tenure. Similarly, many private organizations tailor their workforce policies and practices to compete for talent and align employee skills and behaviors with organizational goals.

This study would look at personnel systems and practices outside of Title 5 in areas such as recruitment and selection, classification, compensation, performance management, diversity and inclusion, awards, benefits, work-life programs, employee protections, and labor relations. By exploring systems and practices outside Title 5, this research will seek to learn how to better manage the Federal workforce while preserving merit and recognizing the distinctive aspects of public sector employment, such as transparency and accountability to the public.

8. Aggression and Violence in the Federal Workplace †

The 2012 MSPB report *Employee Perceptions of Federal Workplace Violence* examined the prevalence and impact of Federal workplace violence, from physical assaults to intimidation to bullying. This study would build on that work by collecting current data and taking a closer look at various forms of workplace aggression, such as physical, verbal, and relational types of aggression. Although such behaviors may not result in physical injuries, they too can harm employees and organizations. A study could address research questions such as:

- How prevalent are violence and aggression, both physical and nonphysical, in Federal workplaces? How has that changed over time?
- Who are the most common perpetrators and targets?
- How do workplace aggression and violence affect employees?
- How do workplace aggression and violence affect organizational outcomes such as retention, motivation, engagement, job satisfaction, confidence in leadership, and public trust?
- What actions do employees and employers take to address workplace aggression and violence? Do Federal employees believe that agency prevention and response efforts are appropriate and effective?

9. Beyond KSAs—Employment Requirements and Their Implications

In recent years, Federal agencies have been sensitized to the ways in which Government systems or facilities may be compromised. Consequently, agencies have become more cautious and systematic about granting access to Government information and infrastructure. Today, many—and perhaps nearly all—Federal employees must meet high standards (such as being suitable to hold a public trust position) and be granted an array of privileges (such as access to agency information technology systems) to obtain and keep their jobs. These requirements differ from knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) and on-the-job performance and conduct in important ways. First, from a legal perspective, they are generally viewed as privileges rather than rights. Second, they may hinge on factors and facts, such as indebtedness, that are clearly distinct from on-the-job competence and conduct. Finally, the power to decide whether an employee is *able* to do his or her job may rest with the agency, rather than the employee.

This study would look into the nature and scope of such employment requirements and their possible implications for merit. Through review of law and regulation, review of case law, and collection and analysis of agency policies and statistics, this study might address questions such as:

- What requirements must an employee meet to be hired or remain in Federal service?
- What is the scope and nature of these requirements? How do these requirements differ across agencies, functions, and occupations?

- How do these requirements affect hiring (e.g., pre-employment processes and time to hire), talent management, and retention?
- How do Federal agencies define and administer these requirements? What use is made of “off duty” information such as credit history and personal use of social media?
- What steps could agencies help prospective employees self-screen or prepare for these requirements?
- How might these requirements modify the nature or value of tenure, as a means of promoting competence, integrity, and political neutrality in the career Federal service?

10. Individual Values Differences in the Workplace

Some differences among employees are job-related, such as differences in leadership ability and level of technical skill. Other differences, such as protected group membership, political affiliation, and individual values or beliefs, are not an appropriate basis for employment decisions in a merit-based system—as the merit principles make clear. But they are a natural result of a workforce that is “representative of all segments of society.” They are also a means for Federal organizations to better address public interests; diversity of thought can yield a better understanding of challenges and a wider range of approaches. Employees’ values and experiences are part of the way they think and can contribute to workplace discussions and decisions. Yet there are indications that tolerance of differing values and beliefs may be declining in American society. How can supervisors and employees themselves effectively leverage employee differences to enhance mission performance in a respectful environment consistent with the merit principles?

This study will use surveys of employees and supervisors, reviews of literature and best practices, interviews with agency decision makers, and other sources to answer research questions such as:

- How do differences in agency culture and work processes promote or obstruct diversity of thought in the workplace?
- To what extent is diversity of viewpoint respected by employees, supervisors, and agency leadership?
- How do value differences among employees affect work accomplishment and work relationships?
- When might these differences lead to workplace conflict?
- What strategies do supervisors use to deal with the negative effects of these differences?
- How do supervisors leverage this type of diversity to improve the agency’s decisions, products, and services?
- What policy and guidance do agencies follow in managing this kind of diversity?

Building an Effective Workforce

1. Aligning Workplace Flexibilities with the Future of Work *

Workplace flexibilities played a significant role in ensuring employees were able to meet both their work and family responsibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many agencies turned to remote work and telework. In fact, OPM reported in the *2020 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey Governmentwide Management Report* that 59 percent of Federal employees teleworked every day, up from 3 percent prior to the pandemic. In addition, employees were given more flexibility to use alternative work schedules and leave benefits.

Two years later, agencies are starting to shift from maximum telework back to a measured return to the office. This is occurring in conjunction with the “Great Reshuffle,” an economic trend in which large numbers of employees have left their jobs in search of more fulfilling roles and additional flexibilities. This study will look at how agencies are aligning workplace flexibilities with the future of work to ensure they maintain a diverse, highly qualified workforce. The study could answer questions such as:

- What lessons did agencies learn about the use of workforce flexibilities like remote work, telework, and alternative work schedules during the pandemic?
- How are agencies integrating those lessons into their reentry plans?
- How do employees and managers view these workplace flexibilities? What are the similarities and differences in their viewpoints?
- Are there other relevant workplace flexibilities that could support the future of work?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of these workplace flexibilities?
- What are the costs and benefits of these flexibilities, particularly highlighting lessons learned during the pandemic?
- What aspects of remote work, telework, alternative work schedules, and leave benefits are agencies maintaining? How will those decisions impact their agency’s ability to carry out their missions?

2. How Does Technology Affect the Work of Federal Employees? *

Advances in technology are changing the way work is performed, the required job-related abilities, and when and where people work. The Federal Government’s move to maximum telework at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, and beyond, is a prime example of how technology is changing the way we work. Visionaries speculate about this technology and the automated workplace of tomorrow. Some warn that artificial intelligence and robotics may replace Federal knowledge workers—or at least require them to reskill, relocate, or reset their expectations about work. It is important to understand how emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, natural language processing, and virtual reality might enhance the work and work experience of Federal employees. It is also important to understand how widely-used technology, such as smartphones, email, video communications applications, and other software, is affecting work in the present. Studies could examine the immediate or future implications of technology for work and people through questions such as:

- How does existing technology affect how Federal employees manage their tasks, time, and attention?
- What impact are legacy systems having on employee productivity?
- How might an infusion of new technology change the future of work and how employees get their jobs done?
- What opportunities are presented by advances in technology and the greater availability of data? Do employees believe that these opportunities are understood and taken by agencies and employees?
- How does media multitasking—frequently switching tasks and modes of work—affect employee productivity?
- How does technology affect telework, alternative work schedules, and other flexibilities?
- Do agency strategic technology plans include adequate upskilling of their workforce and integrating new technology into existing work processes?
- Is employee career planning affected by concerns about being replaced by artificial intelligence or other emerging technology?
- Do employees believe their agency provides them with modern, functional technical solutions and adequate training and support to use them effectively?

3. Workforce Restructuring Rules and Merit-Based Principles *

Governmentwide rules establish a seemingly mechanical, impersonal system for determining who is retained and who is separated when an agency downsizes through reduction-in-force (RIF). Agencies and policymakers have questioned both the functionality and fairness of the system in light of the increasing pace of change and the need for organizations (and employees) who are flexible and broadly capable. Yet legal and regulatory change has been incremental, focusing on the ordering and weight of established retention factors such as performance ratings and length of service. That might imply that agencies have little discretion in matters of restructuring and retention.

In practice, however, agencies have considerable discretion because they have broad flexibility to determine which employees will compete for retention. For example, when an agency abolishes positions, it may limit competition for the remaining jobs to small, narrowly-drawn administrative units of the agency, even if the result is separation of high-performing employees with many years of service and retention of employees with fewer years of service in jobs for which the separated employees are qualified. Further, an agency has substantial authority to move employees across organizations, roles, and geographic locations without using reduction-in-force rules. For example, an agency may reassign an employee to any position at any location in the country, provided the employee is qualified and the grade is the same. The employee must then choose between relocation and separation. This study could explore:

- How Federal agencies view and use existing authorities and flexibilities related to workforce restructuring;
- How non-Federal organizations approach restructuring in policy and implementation; and
- Whether workforce restructuring tools need to be rethought to better balance management's ability to restructure organizations and redeploy staff with the principles of transparent, merit-based placement of staff and fair treatment of employees.

4. HR Technology—Possibilities and Practices *

As with other occupations, technology is driving change in the HR field. Technology makes it possible to innovate and transform HR processes, service delivery, compliance, and analytics. This study would look at how agencies are using technology to not only automate but reengineer HR processes like hiring, onboarding, classification, pay and benefits, performance management, employee development, and other HR areas.

Furthermore, it would evaluate the impact technology is having on the HR profession. While technology may replace some tasks and functions performed by HR specialists and assistants, it could also be used to expand the ability of HR to provide more strategic consulting services.

This study could examine the following:

- The opportunities and risks that artificial intelligence might present in areas such as developing hiring criteria, assessing applicants, and measuring and monitoring employee performance;
- How agencies are using technology to change HR processes and services and support strategic functions such as workforce planning;
- How technology solutions affect the HR workforce;
- Types of HR technology and applications that are available or in use;
- Advantages and disadvantages of HR technology solutions;
- Barriers to implementing HR technology solutions;
- Potential pitfalls and effective approaches to implementing HR technology; and
- Things to consider in vendor selection and working with vendors.

5. Preparing the HR Workforce for the Present and Future †

For the past 30 years, the hope has been that Federal HR offices would become “strategic partners,” moving from a focus on operations and legal compliance to a focus on solutions and organizational results. To that end, HR staff would transform from administrators to advisors, helping managers recruit and utilize people to accomplish organizational goals.

These transitions appear far from complete. First, efforts to rethink HR services and HR service delivery continue, both inside and outside Government. Second, concerns about Federal workforce capacity (reflected in GAO’s designation of human capital as a “high-risk” area) suggest that HR strategy or execution continue to fall short. Finally, survey results indicate concern about the ability of HR staff to serve as effective consultants and advisors. This study would build on MSPB’s 2020 research brief [*The State of the Federal HR Workforce: Changes and Challenges*](#) on the state of the Federal HR workforce. Possible research questions may include:

- Should the HR specialist occupation be “professionalized” along the lines of the contracting function, with formal entry and education requirements?
- How are HR staff recruited and developed?
- What do managers and employees expect of HR staff? Are those expectations appropriate and achievable?

- How do HR staff training and competence affect outcomes such as managerial satisfaction, adherence to merit principles, strategic alignment of HR policies and practices, and organizational effectiveness?
- What are the attributes of successful HR specialists? Successful HR offices? If these differ across sectors, how?
- How can HR use technology more effectively?
- What barriers exist to HR specialists' ability to recruit and hire a high-quality workforce?

6. Identifying and Filling Employee Skills Gaps

Workforce planning must include analysis of skills gaps: differences between the skills agencies need and the skills employees possess. This is challenging because of the continuing evolution of Federal work, driven by changes in mission, public expectations, technology, and employee skills and abilities. It is also challenging because responsibility for developing and deploying skills is shared across agency leadership, strategic planners, hiring managers and individual employees. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) has pursued an ongoing research program in this area, and OPM has worked with agencies to develop strategic plans to anticipate, identify, and correct skills gaps in critical occupations. Public sector, nonprofit, and private sector employers also face these challenges. Through literature and best practices reviews, agency interrogatories, and interviews with agency decision makers, this study would answer such research questions as:

- Where skills gaps exist, how did they emerge, and how might they have been foreseen, prevented, or closed?
- What strategies are agencies using explicitly to anticipate, identify, and correct skills gaps?
- How are agencies using upskilling or reskilling strategies or pilots to help fill gaps?
- How are these strategies shaped or constrained by other policies, especially in the areas of hiring, pay, employee development, and retention?
- What are the appropriate roles for agency decision makers and employees for anticipating and filling skills gaps? Do expectations differ between these two perspectives?
- Do employees believe their agencies are doing a good job preparing them to meet the demands of future work? Conversely, do agency decision makers believe employees are adequately preparing themselves?
- What general competencies are needed in the Federal workforce and how is this changing?
- What implications do the findings have for agency investment in employee development, Governmentwide training policy, and how employees approach career planning?

7. Work at the Leading Edge—Recruiting and Managing the STEMM Workforce

Employees in science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and medical (STEMM) occupations are central to many Federal organizations. For example, they conduct research at the Naval Research Laboratory, evaluate patent applications at the Patent and Trademark Office, develop environmental standards and monitor compliance at the Environmental Protection Agency, provide health care to veterans at the Veterans Health Administration, and work across Government to protect agencies and the public from cyber attacks.

However, there is concern about whether the supply of STEMM employees is sufficient to meet demand, and whether the Federal Government can effectively compete for available talent. Beyond

recruitment, there are also questions about the ability of Federal agencies to deliver the rewarding work and provide the professional development and competitive compensation needed to retain STEMM employees. This study could address questions such as:

- How do jobs and careers in STEMM vary, across and within STEMM occupations?
- Do particular occupations or types of work pose distinctive challenges in recruitment, management, or retention?
- What are successful practices to recruit and retain STEMM employees?
- How does the Federal Government use, develop, and maintain the talents of STEMM employees?
- What is the work experience of STEMM employees, particularly those employees in historically underrepresented groups?
- When and why do STEMM employees leave?
- What can be done, in policy or practice, to better attract, utilize, and retain a diverse cadre of STEMM employees?

8. A Closer Look at Employee Retention

Retention of competent, committed employees is vital to organizations. As Government becomes increasingly knowledge-based and technology-dependent, challenges in recruitment, retention, and motivation have increased. Younger workers (such as the “Millennials” born between 1980 and 1994) may present a special challenge. The “Great Resignation,” an economic trend noted mid-pandemic in which employees began resigning from jobs in large numbers, has now been recast as the “Great Reshuffle” where employees are looking for more fulfilling jobs with greater flexibility. These are examples of why retention research is important. This research would attempt to determine what intrinsic or extrinsic motivators influence the decision to stay or leave. This study could use workforce data and surveys or interviews of current or former employees to answer questions such as:

- How has the Federal Government been affected by the Great Reshuffle? Are there particular occupations or grade levels that have been affected and if so, why?
- Do Federal agencies make any particular effort to identify, engage, or retain their highest-performing or most essential employees?
- How do demographic groups differ in retention factors and decisions?
- What organizational or individual characteristics are predictors of quitting?
- Can patterns of job quitting be categorized in ways that are useful for planning and action?
- To what extent do intrinsic and extrinsic motivators influence retention and turnover?

9. Creating a Culture of Engagement to Drive Performance and Mission Success

Recruiting and retaining high-quality talent, motivating employees, and supporting and obtaining high performance are essential to mission accomplishment. Yet factors such as impending retirements, reorganizations, budget constraints, and intensifying competition for talent are making these outcomes more difficult to achieve. Research suggests that employee engagement can address these challenges and drive agency performance. This study builds on previous research to address

unanswered questions about the nature, causes, and consequences of engagement. Possible questions may include:

- The nature of engagement: What does employee engagement look like in cognitive, emotional, and behavioral terms?
- Drivers of engagement: Which job characteristics and aspects of the organizational culture are most likely to drive engagement? Do drivers differ across employees (e.g., age, tenure, supervisory status, telework status, location, and military status)? How do autonomy, purpose, and meaning affect engagement?
- Consequences of employee engagement: How does engagement affect individuals (e.g., retention, job satisfaction, and performance) and organizations (e.g., mission success)?
- Action planning and promising practices: What actions have Federal agencies taken to improve employee engagement? Which practices have succeeded? What steps can be taken to re-engage the disengaged? What challenges have agencies experienced?

10. An Evaluation of Traditional Workplace Benefit Programs

Traditional Federal employee benefit programs provide advantages when recruiting, hiring, and managing a diverse workforce. Annual and sick leave exist not only to make the Federal Government competitive in the job marketplace, but also to prevent employee burnout, limit the spread of illness, and promote recovery and the return to productive work. Retirement programs were first instituted in the Federal Government to address the issue of employees who had dedicated their lives to public service only to find that they could not afford to stop working, even when declining health made it appropriate. Health insurance not only fosters healthier—and therefore more productive—employees but also has become an expected benefit from any large employer. Access to exercise rooms, green spaces, influenza shots, and other wellness programs are similarly intended to enhance employee performance while also making the Government a more appealing competitor for in-demand talent. Yet, the Government rarely: (1) quantifies the cost of these programs; (2) measures their contribution to employee recruitment and retention, organizational productivity, or broader societal goals; or (3) reviews the structure of these programs to see if they can be better structured. Issues we may study include, but are not limited to:

- Which benefits programs do employees use? Which are most valued, and does this differ across dimensions such as occupation, stage of life or career, or pay level?
- What are the costs and benefits of a hybrid program of defined and contributory retirement benefits (Federal Employees Retirement System pension plus the Thrift Savings Plan) and what would best serve the goals of recruiting and retaining a high-quality workforce (including encouraging rotations into the private sector) while keeping commitments that have been made to the current workforce?
- What are the costs and benefits of the existing Federal employee leave system, and what are the goals and structures of other employers' systems?
- What are the costs of the different wellness programs, which ones are valued most, and what would offer the greatest return on investment in such programs?
- Which benefit programs do Federal agencies tailor to specific human capital goals (such as employee recruitment or performance) or particular segments of their workforce?

Recruitment and Hiring

1. Fair and Open Competition—Practices and Challenges *

The merit principle of fair and open competition for filling jobs is a longstanding and fundamental element of the Federal civil service. Historically, that principle was implemented through a system of centralized job posting and examinations. With the confluence of a near-complete decentralization of the Federal hiring process and a proliferation of noncompetitive hiring authorities, that system is disappearing. What does that imply for the meaning and practice of “fair and open competition”? Questions this study could address include:

- Are there public policies and requirements that no longer work with a modern recruitment strategy? For example, how do requirements for fair and open competition and other public policies affect merit-based recruitment?
- Does the requirement for public notice improve the ability to recruit qualified applicants?
- What commitments do other employers make to applicants and the public, and how do they balance open and targeted recruitment?
- Are there barriers, in policy or implementation, to recruiting and hiring a Federal workforce representative of society?

2. How Do Hiring Officials Decide Who Gets the Job? *

Selection tools are designed to give organizations and officials relevant and reliable information about applicants’ abilities to help them make hiring decisions. There is extensive research on these tools, but little research on how hiring officials use the tools or how they select among referred candidates. For example, we have little understanding of how Federal hiring officials: (1) consider and use different assessments, such as interviews and occupational questionnaires; (2) value specific skills and knowledge in relation to less trainable competencies; or (3) gauge and manage hiring risk (e.g., select a “safe choice” over a lesser-known applicant).

Insight into how hiring officials make decisions could help agencies design more effective hiring processes, help hiring officials make more fully-informed hiring decisions, and make hiring decisions more transparent to employees and other stakeholders. Through methods such as survey research, interviews, and review of agency practices, this study would explore research questions such as:

- What factors do hiring officials consider, what information do they seek, and what information do they use?
- Do selection criteria vary across jobs or organizational characteristics (such as occupation, criticality, staffing levels, and training resources)?
- How do hiring officials differ in how they evaluate and select among candidates?
- How much weight do hiring managers give to direct knowledge or observation of an applicant, compared to other sources or types of information, such as reference checks?
- Are hiring managers’ decision processes consistent with research on the validity and reliability of various assessments?
- Can selection decisions be improved by modifying criteria, changing the sources or presentation of information, or providing guidance or training to hiring officials?

3. Are Federal Vacancy Announcements Accurate and Effective? †

Vacancy announcements form an applicant's first and sometimes only impression of the Federal Government as an employer. Applicants read them to learn about job requirements and gain insights about an agency's workplace culture. An inaccurate picture of the skills and abilities needed for a job can fail to attract well-qualified applicants and clog the application pipeline with less-qualified job seekers who could have self-selected out if given accurate information. This can cost the applicants and the agency time, resources, and unnecessary frustration. In the worst case, the agency may hire a candidate who is well-qualified for the job on paper, but poorly qualified for the job in reality.

This study would examine Federal vacancy announcements, the information they include, and the steps agencies take to ensure their accuracy. Potential information sources include review of present and past vacancy announcements, survey responses, agency interrogatories, and interviews with agency decision makers and human resources specialists. Specific research questions include:

- Is job announcement information about skills and abilities accurate?
- Does accuracy vary across occupations or employment levels (e.g., entry-level through executives)?
- Do job announcements present an inviting picture of the workplace to applicants?
- How do job applicants, recent hires, and hiring managers feel about the accuracy of job announcement information?
- Does inaccuracy contribute to turnover, skills mismatch, or job dissatisfaction?
- What factors or practices, such as reuse of information, contribute to inaccurate or uninviting job announcements?

4. Hiring Authorities: Is Quantity Producing Quality?

It is a basic precept that entry into the Federal civil service should be based on merit. Individuals should be hired based on their competence, not their connections. Previous MSPB research documents a proliferation of hiring authorities for entry into the Federal civil service. That proliferation has been accompanied by a decrease in the use of traditional competitive examining. In this environment, how do agencies define and preserve merit in hiring? How well do agency HR staff understand the new authorities? Possible study questions include:

- What appointing authorities are being used the most? The least?
- What do these authorities do, or permit, that competitive examining does not?
- How are the authorities being used and possibly misused?
- Does the increase in authorities make the hiring process more flexible and responsive?
- Have there been any unintended outcomes from these authorities?
- Are HR staff being adequately trained to use these authorities properly and effectively?
- Has the quality of hires improved under the new authorities?

5. Direct-Hire Authority

The Homeland Security Act of 2002 provided agencies direct-hire authority to appoint candidates to competitive service positions in which OPM has determined there exists a severe shortage of candidates or a critical hiring need. More recently, several high-profile agencies have received additional direct-hire authority from OPM or Congress for mission-critical and support positions that are not covered by the provisions of the Homeland Security Act. Furthermore, many public policy advocates have opined that an expansion of direct hire could speed the hiring process and provide better opportunities to hire candidates with critical skills.

Direct-hire authority permits agencies to hire without regard to some key merit system and public policy provisions. In 2020, MSPB released the brief [*Direct-Hire Authority Under 5 U.S.C. § 3304: Usage and Outcomes*](#) that looked at the direct-hire authority covered under 5 U.S.C. § 3304. Given the increased interest in direct hire to solve agency hiring problems, it is a good time to examine, more in depth, how agencies are using direct-hire authorities, whether these authorities are doing what they are intended to do (e.g., shorten the time it takes to hire qualified applicants), and make recommendations on their use given the lessons learned. This study would assess the value of direct hire in meeting hiring needs as well as the implications it has for merit-based hiring.

6. School-to-Service and the Pathways Programs

FY 2020 Federal employment statistics indicate that only 7 percent of the permanent, full-time Federal workforce was under the age of 30. At the same time, 14 percent of the workforce was 60 years or older. Furthermore, just over a quarter of new hires were under 30 years old.

In 2008, MSPB conducted a study on entry-level new hires and found that, contrary to popular belief, the typical new hire was not a recent college graduate. Instead, the average new hire was 33 years old, with 1 to 5 years of full-time work experience. We identified several barriers to hiring younger employees, including recruitment strategies, assessment practices, and minimum education and occupational requirements.

To help the Federal Government improve its hiring of younger employees, OPM established the Pathways Programs in December 2010. The programs consist of three paths to Federal employment: the Internship Program, the Recent Graduates Program, and the Presidential Management Fellows Program. Nevertheless, the Government still employs relatively few employees under the age of 30. In response, OPM released regulations in 2021 for two new hiring authorities that target students and recent graduates.

This study could look at the following types of issues:

- What are the challenges to hiring a younger workforce?
- What advantages do younger employees bring into the workforce?
- What is the right balance between young and experienced workers?
- How can the Federal Government do a better job of hiring students and recent graduates?
- How well are the Pathways Programs, and other school-to-service programs, working?
- Does the Federal Government need new authorities or strategies to recruit, hire, and retain younger workers?
- How can we ensure that student hiring programs are merit-based?

7. Reforming Federal Hiring

A fair, effective, and efficient hiring process is essential to a merit-based, high-quality workforce. In the 2006 report, *Reforming Federal Hiring: Beyond Faster and Cheaper*, MSPB discussed ways to improve the hiring process and outlined areas for possible reform. This study would update that report in light of subsequent OPM and OMB-led initiatives and MSPB studies related to Federal hiring. This study could examine applicant and agency experience in more depth to answer questions such as:

- Has the applicant experience improved?
- Do selecting officials and HR staff believe that the recruitment process and quality of referrals have improved?
- Have reform efforts, statutory changes, and technological advances had any unintended outcomes?
- Have “bottom line” results (e.g., turnover rates, percentages and levels of employee engagement) been affected?
- Are further administrative or statutory reforms needed to make Federal hiring more fair, effective, or efficient? Should changes be incremental or transformational?
- What is the status of the Federal HR staff and hiring manager relationship, and what should it be?
- What role should the merit system principles play in the future of Federal hiring?
- Are agencies consistently using valid applicant assessments and, if not, how can assessment procedures be improved?
- What are agencies’ perceptions of OPM’s leadership regarding hiring and hiring reform?

8. Recruitment—Attracting and Sourcing Candidates

The Federal Government is facing major human capital challenges as it competes for talent. As an increasing number of Federal employees are eligible for retirement, it seems that fewer applicants with critical skill sets are interested in Federal employment. MSPB explored the Government’s ability to market itself to potential applicants in a 2004 report, *Managing Federal Recruitment: Issues, Insights, and Illustrations*. Much has changed since then, including the skill sets needed to carry out agency missions, changing applicant expectations, the entry of the Millennials and Generation Z into the workforce, and where, when, and how people do work. In addition, with the advancement of technology and social media, there are new ways to search for, identify, and contact potential candidates. It is a good time to reevaluate how prepared Federal agencies are to recruit and source applicants for a variety of occupations. Using best practice reviews, agency interrogatories, and interviews, studies in this area would address questions such as:

- What are some best practices for recruiting and hiring diverse talent pools?
- What strategies have been developed by hiring managers, HR specialists, and other agency personnel that should be more widely used in Federal recruiting?
- How do agencies build and maintain quality relationships with recruitment sources?
- How can recruiting barriers be removed while maintaining merit system principles?
- How can agencies recruit well-qualified candidates for hard-to-fill positions or occupations?
- What solutions are used in locations where all positions are hard-to-fill?

- How can the Government recruit candidates who developed their abilities from “nontraditional” career paths (such as work experience instead of college degree programs)?
- Can Federal recruiting make better use of *sourcing*—recruiting strong candidates who are currently employed and not actively seeking another job?
- How can the Federal Government foster an appealing brand for public service?

9. Federal Job Applicants—Experiences and Insights

The merit system principles state that applicants are to receive fair and equitable treatment, and selections should be based on knowledge, skills, and abilities. The applicant experience also matters for practical reasons, particularly when unemployment is low or competition with other sectors is intense. Assessment of the applicant experience might help Federal agencies improve a hiring process that can be long, complicated, and frustrating and reduce the loss of high-quality applicants.

MSPB has conducted a considerable amount of research on Federal new hires. That research helps us understand the perspective of those who successfully made it through the hiring process. However, we have not assessed the perceptions of those applicants who were not selected, or even those who did not think to apply for Federal jobs. This study would seek insight from these harder-to-reach populations to gain insight into how applicants are treated and what barriers they face during the recruitment and hiring process.

10. Applicant Assessment—Using the Right Tools for the Job

In a merit system, the universal criteria for applicant assessments are that they be job-related, predictive, and fair. Research shows that some types of assessment generally fare better than others on these criteria. But that research does not say what assessment tools or strategies are best-suited to a particular position or setting, how to balance practical considerations such as time and cost, or how to ensure that an assessment is properly developed or effectively used in practice. Yet those are the challenges that Federal agencies face each day, in a world of diverse and complex jobs and delegated, decentralized hiring.

Executive Order 13932, *Modernizing and Reforming the Assessment and Hiring of Federal Job Candidates*, reminded agencies to use valid, competency-based assessments and directed them to scale back reliance upon educational qualifications as a substitute for competencies in the hiring process. OPM and OMB are working with agencies to implement this order and improve their assessment practices, and research in this area could help agencies meet these challenges by providing agencies, HR staff, and hiring officials with guidance on how to choose and implement assessments and assessment strategies. A study could focus on particular assessment tools or applications to answer questions such as:

- How can Federal agencies identify selection criteria and develop assessment strategies when a job is new or otherwise difficult to define?
- How do agencies assess applicants for a particular occupation, function, or line of work?
- How do agencies or other employers use specific assessment tools, such as ability tests and reference checks? How valid and reliable are those assessments, in theory and in practice?
- How do agencies involve subject matter experts in applicant assessment, and does that involvement improve the quality of hire?

- What challenges do agencies encounter in assessment, and how might they be addressed?
- What insights does case law offer for how agencies assess job applicants?
- Beyond validity and reliability, what factors should agencies and their selecting officials consider when selecting assessments and developing assessments?
- What opportunities and challenges are presented by advances in technology, such as machine learning, gaming, social media, and “big data”?

11. Selection Panels: Multiple Perspectives for Assessment

In accord with the merit system principles, the Federal Government strives to implement fair and effective procedures for selecting and promoting qualified employees. Although attention is typically directed at ensuring that the assessment tools are job-related, valid, reliable, efficient and fair, it is also critical to consider the people who will be involved in the selection process because they serve a vital role in implementing the procedures so they function as intended. OPM guidance states that subject matter experts (SMEs) have a role in merit-based hiring, and MSPB research has discussed stages of the hiring process where SMEs can usefully contribute or participate. For example, a selection panel (a group of individuals with specified responsibility for assessing and recommending applicants) might improve the quality of assessment and hiring decisions by adding their perspectives and areas of expertise to those of the selecting official. To examine the prevalence and efficacy of selection panels, this study would seek to answer questions such as:

- When and how do Federal agencies use selection panels?
- At what stage(s) of the process are selection panels being used?
- What types of work or positions benefit most from a selection panel?
- What are the roles of the members of a selection panel?
- How do agencies select, train, and guide panelists?
- What characteristics should a panelist have—or not have?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of using selection panels?

Pay and Performance Management

1. The Probationary Period: Ensuring Employees Meet Standards for Retention *

The sixth merit system principle envisions that employees will meet specified performance standards and that those who “cannot or will not improve their performance to meet required standards” should be separated from service. For competitive service employees, the standard probationary period for a new hire is usually 1 year. During that period, termination of employment was designed to be relatively quick and easy. Nevertheless, MSPB has found that few employees are separated for failure to complete probation, and that Federal agencies sometimes retain an employee the supervisor would have preferred to terminate. Accordingly, policies have been proposed or implemented to extend the probationary period or encourage its use. This study, building on previous MSPB studies, could explore issues such as:

- If a supervisor concludes that a hire was a mistake, when does that happen and what actions do they take next?
- Are supervisors using the probationary period to remove new employees with deficient performance or conduct?
- How does use of the probationary period vary across organizations, occupations, and work environments?
- What challenges do supervisors perceive in acting on a probationary employee who is not meeting expectations?
- How have changes in policy or guidance affected use of the probationary period?
- What might more flexible probationary periods imply for: (1) recruitment and retention processes and (2) the public interest in a merit-based, nonpartisan career civil service?
- What policies or practices might improve use of the probationary period?

2. Correcting Employee Performance and Conduct *

Federal agencies are responsible for ensuring that the conduct and performance of their employees is acceptable. What actions do officials take when conduct or performance is not acceptable? How effective are those actions? Which actions work best, and under what circumstances? Topics this study may investigate include:

- The extent to which employees engage in repeat misconduct or unacceptable performance;
- Steps that agencies might take to reduce the potential for misconduct or unacceptable performance;
- The extent to which a change in conditions (e.g., supervisor, position, or agency) might improve an employee’s performance or conduct, and indicators of when such a change might be productive;
- How effective progressive discipline is and under what circumstances it may work best;
- Potential barriers to agencies taking appropriate conduct or performance-based actions; and
- Actions that agencies take (e.g., debarment) to protect the agency and the public interest when correction is not practical, and any associated barriers.

3. Position Classification in the 21st Century

The system and standards for classifying Federal positions and creating position descriptions were created decades ago in a work environment drastically different from today. At that time, the workspace could be cleanly partitioned into discrete jobs in a clearly defined—and structured—fashion. Now, the integrated and cross-functional nature of much work may make such a regimented system obsolete. Regardless, a formal determination, documentation, and evaluation of a position’s responsibilities and requirements remains central to achieving the merit system principles of providing “equal pay...for work of equal value,” selecting employees “on the basis of relative ability, knowledge, and skills,” and other positive aspects of workforce management.

Questions about the position classification system that could be examined in a study include:

- To what extent does the classification system help agencies manage work and the workforce?
- What problems exist with the design or implementation of the current classification system?
- How does the system support or hinder the movement of employees across roles, jobs, occupations, and organizations?
- What are the alternatives to the current classification system?
- What are the implications of pay systems that are less position-based, and more person-based or market-based?
- What is the current capacity of agencies to classify positions and manage pay systems?
- What should be the role of a central authority with respect to position classification within the Federal Government?

4. Federal Pay Systems: Experience Outside the General Schedule

Although the Governmentwide, multi-occupation General Schedule pay system covers the majority of Federal civilian employees, approximately 20 percent of employees are compensated according to agency- or occupation-specific pay plans, many of which were designed to give greater weight to individual performance or the market rate for their knowledge and skills. With encouragement from OPM, additional agencies have recently indicated an interest in developing alternative pay systems, particularly to improve the recruitment and retention of employees to fill critical positions.

The 2006 MSPB report *Designing an Effective Pay for Performance Compensation System* provided agencies with a roadmap of the options inherent in the design, implementation, and operation of an effective pay for performance system. A further inquiry into this topic may include a closer examination of alternative pay systems in the Federal Government, to include issues such as:

- What factors drove the adoption of an alternative pay system?
- How were the systems implemented, and how do they operate?
- How satisfied are employees and management with the design and administration of that alternative pay system?
- Have organizations evaluated how their pay systems affect employee recruitment, employee retention, cost management, and broader indicators of organizational health or performance?

5. Performance Appraisal Policies, Applications, and Systems

The process of creating performance plans, assessing performance under those plans, and assigning an annual rating level can be laborious and time-consuming and participants often question whether the exercise is beneficial. Such concerns are not unique to the Federal Government, as illustrated by some private sector employers claiming they are “doing away with” annual ratings. Federal agencies do not currently have that freedom: Federal law and regulations require agencies to establish and use performance appraisal systems with periodic appraisals. Beyond that, there is an expectation that personnel decisions, from promotion to pay to retention, are informed or determined by an employee’s past performance.

Issues this study may examine include:

- What are the challenges to establishing relevant, measurable performance standards and reliable performance measures?
- What are the challenges to ensuring that ratings are reflective of employee performance?
- Can these challenges in defining, measuring, and rating performance be overcome, and what are the potential consequences of error?
- What are the roles of appraisals and summary level ratings in the Federal HR system? Why is the system designed this way, and how else might those roles be fulfilled?
- What types of systems do agencies use to manage performance and how do they help or hinder performance management over time?
- What can the Federal Government learn from other employers’ efforts to improve or replace the performance appraisal?
- What is the role of technology in the appraisal process, and what are its benefits and risks?

6. Achieving the Multiple Goals of Performance Feedback

Performance feedback is a critical interaction between supervisors and employees. However, these discussions can and should accomplish goals beyond conveying an official evaluation of the employee’s work. For example, a performance discussion can prospectively clarify the supervisor’s expectations for the employee, as well as document when these expectations have not been met. Alternately, performance feedback can serve to coach and motivate employees to excel and to identify desired developmental opportunities. These goals are distinct and potentially conflicting, and their achievement may depend on factors including the supervisor’s skill, the sources and delivery of the feedback, and the employee’s willingness to speak candidly. This study will examine the various purposes of feedback and factors that may make it more effective by exploring issues such as:

- What are the different types of performance feedback?
- What do employees want from feedback and does that vary across job, organizational, or personal characteristics?
- How do work arrangements such as telework and teams affect feedback?
- How does feedback influence outcomes such as motivation, performance behaviors, and perceptions of fairness, retention, and whistleblowing?
- What are the different sources of feedback, what kind of information might each type provide, and what are the challenges in using those sources?

- What factors make feedback effective (e.g., timeliness, constructiveness, source credibility)?
- How skilled are supervisors at achieving the various goals of performance feedback discussions and how can this skill be improved?
- Can technology facilitate effective feedback?

7. Improving and Recognizing Employee Performance

Civil service law authorizes agencies to demote or remove an employee for “unacceptable performance” and prescribes standards and procedures for such action. However, MSPB research has found that supervisors typically view poor performance as something broader than unacceptable performance as defined in law. Employees make a similar distinction, and survey data suggests that weak performance is more common than unacceptable performance. There are also continuing concerns that good or exceptional performance is not adequately recognized. Issues that this study may examine include:

- The prevalence and patterns of unacceptable, weak, and exceptional performance;
- The extent to which laws, regulations, policies, and practices may help or hinder agencies in addressing unacceptable or weak performance;
- The ability of the Government to effectively acknowledge, encourage, and enhance the performance of good or exceptional employees;
- The ability of human resources staff to support supervisors in addressing low performance and rewarding high performance;
- How policies or actions may serve to motivate or demotivate employee performance; and
- Barriers to improving, motivating, or recognizing performance.

Supervision and Leadership

1. Selection and Management of Federal Supervisors *

Supervisors and managers are central to organizational performance and good management of employees. Research has shown that good supervisors can sustain or drive employee engagement and high performance, while incompetent or abusive supervisors can undermine productivity and drive unwanted turnover. Supervisors are also the primary candidate pool for higher-level managerial and executive positions. Therefore, it is essential that agencies select and train those who are most capable of effectively managing people.

However, MSPB has found that supervisory selection practices often place too much emphasis on technical qualifications and too little emphasis on the competencies needed to lead people and programs. Accomplishing work through others requires special interpersonal skills that are much more difficult to assess than technical qualifications. Furthermore, the way supervisors do their work has changed, particularly in the last couple of years with remote work being so prevalent. However, there is no indication that there has been a change in the way supervisors are trained or otherwise supported in their role. This study would examine current challenges and seek ways forward through research questions such as:

- What non-technical competencies do supervisors need to be effective? Do these differ across lines of work or organizational settings?
- Are there opportunities for employees to develop non-technical competencies for supervisory positions (i.e., can good supervisors be “made” or are they “just born”)?
- What assessment tools could assist in evaluating the degree to which candidates for supervisory positions possess necessary non-technical competencies?
- If an agency expects a supervisor to perform technical work, how is that reflected in the selection process?
- What kind of training and support do supervisors receive in carrying out the non-technical aspects of their jobs?
- What case study examples demonstrate effective and efficient supervisory selection and training procedures, as well as other supervisory support mechanisms?

2. Understanding the Roles of Teams and Team Leaders *

In surveys conducted by both MSPB and OPM, approximately 12 percent of employees identified themselves as “team leaders,” far exceeding the percentage of employees officially classified as team leaders or work leaders. That implies that organizations are making considerable use of a nontraditional work structure and that many employees are serving in a role that receives little formal recognition from the personnel system. Yet MSPB survey data suggests that the roles and perspectives of team leaders are distinctive; their experiences and views are neither those of line employees, nor those of supervisors. Issues that may be studied include:

- Why do agencies establish team leader positions? What organizational needs or characteristics call for “teams” and people to lead them?
- What types of teams do organizations create? How are these teams like or unlike traditional work units?

- What are the responsibilities of “team leaders”? How do these differ in scope or duration from the responsibilities of supervisors?
- How do agencies recruit, select, train, and manage team leaders?
- What role do team leaders play in areas such as employee selection, performance management, and discipline?
- What are the potential implications of teams and team leaders for HR management (e.g., labor relations, performance management, and classification) and organizational effectiveness?
- What are the distinctive demands, challenges, and rewards of team leadership?
- What can the Government do to better select or support team leaders?

3. Dual Career Paths for Supervisors and Technical Specialists *

A dual career path provides a means for technical experts to receive higher pay for possessing advanced, specialized skills and taking on complex, higher-level nonsupervisory responsibilities. In 2015, GAO recommended “using a dual career ladder structure as a way to advance employees who may have particular technical skills and/or education but who are not interested in or inclined to pursue a management or supervisory track.”¹ This study could explore questions such as:

- Which organizations in the Federal Government or other sectors have successfully implemented dual career paths?
- How do the paths differ in selection, pay, incentives, training, and other aspects of human resources management?
- How might dual career paths affect the roles, selection, and accountability of supervisors?
- How might dual career paths for advancement affect recruitment, employee satisfaction, intention to stay, and employee and agency performance?
- What are the best ways to encourage employee interest in a track? What is involved in changing tracks later?
- Are there any barriers to implementing a dual career path?

4. Management of the Senior Executive Service

Numerous studies have shown effective leadership is critical to the performance and success of an organization. Leaders are not only expected to articulate a clear vision for the future, communicate expectations, and demonstrate commitment but also inspire confidence, motivation, and a sense of purpose. The Senior Executive Service was established by the Civil Service Reform Act (CSRA) of 1978. It was intended to be a mobile corps of executives that could serve across Government agencies to ensure productivity and efficiency. In addition, the CSRA intended to incentivize good performance by basing executives’ compensation on performance.

In 1989, MSPB conducted a survey of the Senior Executive Service (SES) which was summarized in the report *Senior Executive Service: Views of Former Federal Executives*. Thirty years later, it is appropriate to revisit the issues of job satisfaction and effective management of the SES highlighted in this

¹ GAO, “Improved Supervision and Better Use of Probationary Periods Are Needed to Address Substandard Employee Performance,” March 2015.

study. This study would explore the experiences and concerns of current senior executives and well as those who have recently left the SES. A broader range of methods, including agency interrogatories and interviews, would supplement the survey-only approach of the 1989 study.

Research questions to be addressed could include:

- Has implementation of the SES met the intent of the CSRA, particularly in terms of mobility and fair compensation?
- Are statutory authorities used appropriately to appoint and deploy members of the SES?
- Do agencies have the right balance between political appointees and career SES?
- Are the Executive Core Qualifications (ECQs) an appropriate foundation for SES selection, development, and performance evaluation—or is an update needed?
- How do agencies build a pipeline into the SES? How are managers developed to meet the job demands of the SES?
- How do SES Career Development Programs help develop new executives? Do they generate candidates who are ready to hold SES jobs?
- How do Federal agencies evaluate the development, performance, and effectiveness of senior leaders? Which metrics do they use (e.g., turnover rates, agency goals, Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey scores)?
- What actions do Federal agencies take if a senior leader is not performing acceptably?
- Does the current system of compensation, bonuses, and nonmonetary rewards motivate members of the SES to remain in Government service and do their best work?
- Are personnel actions being used appropriately to develop senior executives and support high-priority or understaffed programs?

Focus on OPM

1. OPM Oversight of Delegated Authorities and Responsibilities *

The CSRA sought to balance delegation and flexibility with accountability. One component of that accountability is OPM oversight of how agencies manage their delegated responsibilities.

Accordingly, 5 U.S.C. § 1104 requires OPM to “establish and maintain an oversight program” to ensure that activities under delegated authorities are in accordance with the MSPs and OPM standards. The staffing and focus of OPM and Federal agency oversight programs have varied greatly since the passage of the CSRA, in response to changes in OPM’s structure and finances, evolving views of compliance and accountability, and debate over the proper role and authority of a central personnel agency. During that time, personnel rules and practices have also changed, with agencies gaining more flexibility in areas such as hiring and pay, which OPM is to monitor. Possible research questions include:

- What human resources programs and decisions are subject to systematic compliance monitoring through OPM or agency review?
- How does OPM assess compliance with law and merit system principles in the excepted service, specifically hiring authorities and agencies outside of Title 5?
- As the role of OPM changes (e.g., in response to recommendations from the 2021 National Academy of Public Administration report on OPM and the 2019 transfer of the background investigation function), what is the impact to OPM’s accountability and oversight role?
- What effects have OPM oversight activities had on agency HR policies and practices?
- How do Federal agencies, Federal employees, and other stakeholders view OPM oversight?
- Does the CSRA provide adequate authority for OPM or other agencies to assess and enforce Federal agency adherence to merit system principles?

2. The Role of a Central Human Resources Authority *

The CSRA established OPM to be the Administration’s voice on HR matters as well as the Government’s leader in Federal HR management. Specifically, the CSRA enumerated a number of actions and roles for OPM, as follows:

- Delegate HR management authorities to Federal agencies;
- Operate an oversight program that would ensure that agencies’ use of those authorities was consistent with law and merit system principles; and
- Lead a functional, evolving civil service system through research and policy.

This study may examine:

- The changing roles of OPM and the extent to which its current operations fulfill the intentions of the CSRA.
- The extent to which Federal agencies, or other bodies, perform functions such as policy development, administration of complex HR programs, oversight, and delegation or withdrawal of personnel authority.
- Possible future roles of a central human resources authority with the Federal civil service in achieving a high-performing, merit-based workplace.

- How best to balance potentially competing roles that a central human resources authority might have to fulfill. For example:
 - To lead a nonpartisan Federal civil service rooted in MSPs while developing and advocating policies that reflect a particular Administration’s vision and priorities;
 - To formulate policies that are grounded in professional practice and research, yet responsive to policymaker and citizen perspectives on how Federal employees should be managed;
 - To maintain a centralized presence over Federal HR issues while decentralizing HR authorities to afford agencies appropriate flexibility and discretion; and
 - To lead the civil service’s human capital program and oversee agency practices while providing products and services to those agencies on a fee-for-service basis.