



Responsive Public Management

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The US federal workforce and the challenges of recruitment

The process for recruiting federal employees is both complex and cumbersome. Over the last two years, a wide-ranging reform effort has begun to pay off. The primary goal is to attract qualified students, at a time when the crisis has led to the early departure of qualified staff that are difficult to replace.

In May 2010, President Obama tasked the Office of Personnel Management with a thoroughgoing reform of hiring practices. Initially, the idea was to streamline procedures and reduce hiring times from several months to several weeks¹. Prior to the reform, the many federal agencies, which take on some 300,000 staff each year², were saddled with slow and cumbersome procedures. After completing the application process (available only online, and via a plethora of poorly-coordinated sites) and sending in a thick file (a CV of at least five pages, diplomas, certificates, etc.), short-listed candidates would then undergo several months of interviews and tests. This included the famous "KSA" (Knowledge, Skills and Abilities), a multiple-choice test of between 100 and 300 questions, depending on the agency), along with a number of personality and security checks. Altogether, the recruitment process for federal jobs lasted several months³, a length of time that was counterproductive both for applicants (who were often not informed that they were not chosen) and for the recruiter. Moreover, the recruiter had to choose the winning candidate from among the three top-scoring applicants, and had no right to consider other candidates who might have perhaps been better suited.

Attracting students

More than two years after the reform got underway, there has been much improvement. Now, a single web portal, USAJobs, acts as a gateway for all available positions, which makes things much simpler⁴ (despite several technical problems and delays during 2011). The agencies breathed a collective sigh of relief at the elimination of the KSA and the "rule of three". The former was replaced by assessments⁵, and the latter by category ratings⁶. Both are still somewhat cumbersome and require active HR involvement. Hiring times, however, have been shortened: 42% of employees are hired within 80 days⁷, and the overall average hiring time is 105 days⁸.

¹ Prior to the reform, they had been an average of 3 to 6 months (and up to nine months in certain agencies). At the Department of Defense, for example, reducing the number of hiring procedures from 32 to 14 brought hiring times down to 76 days.

² According to the OPM, there are currently 2,048,467 federal employees.

³ See note 1

⁴ The site was improved once again in October 2011,
<http://www.federaltimes.com/article/20110831/PERSONNEL02/108310301/>

⁵ Interviews, testing, real-life situations.

⁶ A table of predefined skills for dividing candidates into two or more "quality categories" (very qualified, qualified, etc.). Agencies interview and make selections from within the highest quality category regardless of the number of candidates. See http://www.opm.gov/employ/category_rating/cr_factsheet.pdf

⁷ <http://www.federaltimes.com/article/20110216/PERSONNEL02/102160301/>

⁸ <http://www.federaltimes.com/article/20110303/PERSONNEL02/103030304/>

The government's main concern is attracting qualified students, who in the US are generally not drawn to jobs in the public sector. This is a delicate topic, partly because of a sort of rivalry between students and veterans, who are theoretically first in line for a number of jobs⁹, but about whom the agencies are less enthusiastic. Another reason has to do with the "hijacking", by these same agencies, of a former recruitment method, the Federal Career Intern Program (FCIP). Under the FCIP, for certain specific jobs, applicants were given two-year contracts prior to being taken on permanently, with the contracts being directly managed by the agency. Originally such contracts were rare, but ended up being more used than other recruitment methods. When the FCIP was introduced in 2001, it was used for 411 hires. By 2009 this number had grown to 26,709, or 10% of total hires – much to the dismay of those applying in the normal way and veterans.

It took a year and a half of painstaking efforts between the official launch of the *ad hoc* portion of the reform, known as "Pathways"¹⁰ (Decree 13562 of 27 December 2010) and its entry into force in July 2012. Pathways is made up of three programmes. The Internship Program (which existed already) recruits student interns who then sit a competitive examination in order to become civil servants. The new Recent Graduates Program hires new graduates on a two-year contract, who are also invited to sit a competitive exam. Finally, the Presidential Management Fellows Program, which was introduced thirty years ago for the purpose of hiring high-potential university graduates, was overhauled and expanded (for example, its hiring calendar was finally brought into line with the university year).

Questions about the future

The stakes are high. Despite budget and salary freezes, the government must continue to recruit. This is not only due to an aging workforce (69% of federal employees are over 40), but also because manpower constraints are beginning to make it difficult to carry out certain government missions (including, for example, distribution of food stamps, which help one in five Americans put food on the table¹¹). The Obama administration and the OPM are therefore attempting to speed things up and to encourage agency buy-in to the reform. To do so, they have stepped up information campaigns, distributed manuals and brochures, held workshops and offered training sessions for managers. The need to recruit qualified candidates goes hand-in-hand with the need to retain talented staff. This has been made more difficult by pension reforms and pension cuts, which has hastened departures from the federal workplace. Groups of executives, experts and think tanks have published report after report on the best practices of the most forward-thinking agencies and offer advice to managers. In 2009 for example, the Partnership for Public Service¹², one of the largest NGOs and a long-term partner of both the OPM and the federal administration, launched FedRecruit, a three-year program to help agencies hire during the "Ice Age" of the crisis¹³. Partnership for Public Service is also very active in putting agencies and universities in contact. Currently, 760 college campuses and 75 agencies are part of the Call to Serve network. In its Strategic Plan for 2010-2015, the OPM has included a number of actions (workshops, seminars, etc.), to inform and train recruiters in "hiring the best". It goes without saying that current concerns about the federal debt could compromise civil service recruitment policies. The prospect of an automatic freeze on public spending ("sequestration") in January 2013 creates an additional unknown.

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⁹ Veterans are given priority for certain positions. They constitute 8% of the total civil federal workforce (25% including the Department of Defense).

¹⁰ <http://www.opm.gov/news/opm-issues-proposed-regulations-to-help-recruit-and-train-students-and-recent-graduates,1710.aspx>

¹¹ <http://www.pewstates.org/projects/stateline/headlines/one-of-five-americans-struggling-to-afford-food-survey-finds-85899413286>

¹² Washington-based NGO whose goal is to "revitalize our federal government by inspiring a new generation to serve".

¹³ http://www.ourpublicservice.org/OPS/programs/documents/fedrecruit_P3Requirements.pdf