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A Review of Federal Vacancy Announcements

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



Managers who possess this

THE CHAIRMAN



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

April 2003

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

Dear Sirs:

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 report, "Help Wanted: A Review of Federal Vacancy Announcements."

As many have noted, there is the potential for what has been referred to by the General Accounting Office as a human capital crisis in the Federal Government. In many agencies, up to half of their employees are currently eligible or will become eligible to retire in the next 5 years. Similarly, results from the U.S. Office of Personnel Management's recent Governmentwide survey indicate that for a variety of reasons including retirement, nearly one out of three Federal employees are planning on leaving their current job within the next 3 years. The ability of the Government to provide needed services to the American people will depend on finding highly competent new employees to replace many of those who leave. To meet this challenge, the Government needs a comprehensive recruiting strategy to attract highly qualified applicants. Vacancy announcements are key in such a strategy since they are the main source, and often the only source, of public information on Federal employment opportunities. However, the way vacancy announcements are often written does not help the Government's recruiting efforts. Our systematic review of a random sample of Federal vacancy announcements found that at least half of them are poorly written and that they make little or no attempt to sell the Government, the agency, or the positions to be filled. Far too often, vacancy announcements are difficult to understand and use threatening and insulting language—characteristics that are more likely to drive applicants away than attract them.

Many of the problems we found can be corrected immediately. There are no insurmountable legal or regulatory barriers to creating better written, better organized, and more appealing vacancy announcements. What is more challenging is fixing some of the complex institutional barriers to hiring that came to light during our review of vacancy announcements. Our review found that many agencies lack comprehensive recruiting and assessment strategies to help attract and hire highly qualified applicants. This report offers some suggestions that may help resolve many of the shortcomings we have identified.

I believe you will find this report useful as you consider issues regarding the ability of the Federal Government to attract and hire a highly qualified workforce.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Susanne T. Marshall".

Susanne T. Marshall

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Executive summary

One of the Federal Government's most serious challenges is to find and manage highly capable employees who will effectively and efficiently provide needed services to the American people. In this decade, the composition of the Government's workforce will dramatically change: about 600,000 current Federal employees are projected to retire by 2010. Many of those who will leave must be replaced if the Government is to provide needed services to the public. Hiring a large number of new employees with the right competencies is a challenge that must be addressed now.

Federal vacancy announcements are an important step in the Government's effort to recruit top talent. But the way vacancy announcements are written does not further this effort. Because many agencies have carried their concerns about laws and regulations to extremes, the language of vacancy announcements tends to be legalistic, stilted, and hard to follow. Further, agencies don't use vacancy announcements as recruiting tools. In fact, less than half of the human resources (HR) office staff members who responded to our survey on the subject indicated that vacancy announcements are effective in informing applicants about their agencies' missions. Far too often, vacancy announcements turn applicants away rather than encourage them to apply.

There is no intrinsic reason why the problems we observed regarding vacancy announcements cannot be corrected. That is, there are no insurmountable legal or regulatory barriers to interfere with creating better written, better organized, more appealing vacancy announcements. However, some of the problems that we identified with vacancy announcements are actually symptoms of other, more complicated problems faced by the Govern-

ment's staffing system. Moreover, agencies appear to continue to give a relatively low priority to human resources programs, especially recruiting new employees.

Among the problems we identified in the course of our review of vacancy announcements are the following:

Agencies lack a comprehensive recruiting strategy. Vacancy announcements do not replace recruiting, yet many agencies seem to expect that vacancy announcements alone will sell their jobs to potential applicants. This problem would be less serious if the selling were at least done effectively. However, announcements don't appear to be targeted towards identified pools of candidates nor do they have a unified message designed to create an image of the Government as an employer of choice. On the whole, the announcements we reviewed provide little evidence that agencies have analyzed their jobs properly and developed plans for filling the jobs on the basis of those analyses.

Agencies are not setting themselves up to make good selections. The sample of vacancy announcements we reviewed suggests that agencies lack a

comprehensive candidate assessment strategy that will assist them in making good selections. When evaluating and selecting applicants, agencies rely heavily on the assessment of previous work experience rather than on assessments of competence or potential. We also found that agencies appear to use assessment tools ineffectively. Ratings of training and experience can be effective for certain jobs but not all. They can be ineffective, for example, for entry-level jobs where high-potential applicants may lack the amount of experience or education agencies are looking for, but may have the competencies needed for excellent performance.

HR professionals' lack of expertise. The well-written vacancy announcements and the strategic recruitment and assessment plans that are key components of a high-quality hiring program are largely the responsibility of an agency's HR professionals. While many HR professionals are highly competent, many others lack the expertise to develop and implement the necessary strategies for successful hiring programs. Heavy HR workloads and steady loss of staff over the last decade are only partly responsible for this problem. The training HR specialists receive, the manner in which they themselves are selected, and the agency management priorities that do not stress the importance of good HR management all contribute to this situation.

The Government is faced with serious challenges. It is experiencing a "crisis in human capital" that threatens the Government's ability to serve the public well. But these challenges are by no means insurmountable, provided that agencies place greater emphasis on the HR function and the recruitment of highly capable Federal employees. HR has limited resources so it makes good business sense to ensure that the tools used, such as vacancy announcements, are as good as they can be. Such excellence can be obtained only through collaboration with and cooperation among all stakeholders.

With these challenges in mind, we offer the following recommendations:

In collaboration with appropriate stakeholders, chief human capital officers and HR directors should:

- **Develop and implement a comprehensive recruiting strategy, with improved vacancy announcements as a major component. In developing such a recruiting strategy, agencies should:**
 - Identify the groups from which they need to recruit, then write vacancy announcements targeted to those groups.
 - Greatly reduce the length of vacancy announcements by providing only relevant information and avoiding repetitive statements and unnecessary verbiage.
 - Reduce the use of negative, threatening, and legalistic language.
 - Design a message to sell the job and the agency, and to the extent possible, present the Federal Government as an employer of choice.
 - Describe the job and its requirements clearly and realistically.
 - Make the application process simple, breaking the hiring process into steps whenever feasible. Require the least amount of information needed to make basic qualification determinations, then request more information as needed later in the process.
 - Give clear and straightforward instructions on how to apply. Also, give applicants options on how to submit their applications. Do not limit filing methods to electronic media.
 - Move towards automation to support recruiting and subsequent assessment efforts.
- **Develop a comprehensive assessment strategy.** An essential first step in filling any vacancy should be to conduct a thorough job analysis and then to choose assessment tools that are appropriate for the job and the candidate pool. When feasible and with the aid of technology, agencies should minimize the burden on applicants by conducting applicant assessment in stages.
- **Examine the quality of their HR staffs.** Agencies should assess the competencies of current HR staff and develop a strategy to ensure they have the competencies and resources needed to carry out their responsibilities. The strategy should include establishing procedures for select-

ing and developing HR professionals to ensure that they have the competencies needed for high performance in the roles demanded of them. Organizations and individuals have developed a number of competency models that agencies can use. For example, the HR roles that the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has identified are technical HR expert, strategic business partner, change agent, and leader.

The director of OPM should:

- **Revise the Federal regulation pertaining to vacancy announcements.** The regulation at 5 C.F.R. § 330.707 lists the information required in vacancy announcements. The list is fairly modest and includes information essential to job applicants. However, the regulation requires the inclusion of explanations regarding eligibility requirements for veterans preference and career transition program consideration. This material can be lengthy and sometimes complex and confusing, and certainly does not apply to the majority of potential job candidates. Therefore, the regulation should be revised to

make inclusion of such lengthy material optional as long as the announcement provides a hyperlink that makes the details available to interested applicants. This should allow agencies to make vacancy announcements shorter and tailor them more easily to targeted groups.

- **Make USAJOBS, the Government’s career opportunity site, more attractive, welcoming, and easy to use.** To be more effective, USAJOBS should be developed and maintained with applicants in mind, many of whom may not be technologically savvy or familiar with Federal hiring procedures. In particular, OPM should:
 - Make navigation easier by making information more transparent and meaningful.
 - Create a simple and more precise job search capability that can provide a list of jobs organized in order of relevance to the job seeker.
- **Continue providing agencies with information on writing better vacancy announcements, building on its recent efforts to modernize and improve Federal vacancy announcements.**

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Introduction

One of the Federal Government's most serious challenges is to hire competent employees who will effectively provide needed services to the American people. It is projected that about 40 percent of Federal employees eligible to retire in this decade will do so, meaning that about 600,000 employees will retire by 2010.¹ Concerned by the skills gap that could result from this exodus, the President Bush highlighted human resources management (HRM) in his management agenda.² Under this agenda, agencies will be evaluated on the results of their HRM programs, and the results will be taken into account during budget deliberations.³

Purpose of the study

To respond to the challenge and meet their workforce needs, agencies must begin now, if they have not yet started, to develop a comprehensive recruiting strategy that attracts highly qualified applicants. Vacancy announcements are key in any such strategy since they are the main source of public information on Federal employment opportunities. However, a February 2000 U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB or Board) study on the job search experiences of new hires identified problems

with vacancy announcements.⁴ Given vacancy announcements' importance in the recruiting process, the study findings prompted the Board to take a closer look at vacancy announcements. In particular, this study focused on the following questions:

- What is the quality of Federal vacancy announcements?
- Are vacancy announcements written in a way that would attract high quality applicants?
- Do vacancy announcements follow the merit principles?
- What are the factors that affect the quality and use of vacancy announcements?

Scope and methodology

We reviewed vacancy announcements only for jobs posted on USAJOBS, the U.S. Office of Personnel Management's (OPM's) centralized electronic jobs database.⁵ To prepare this report, we relied on the following sources of information:

- Summaries of 10,000 vacancy announcements posted on USAJOBS during fiscal year 2001. The summaries provided us with a broad view of

¹ U.S. Office of Personnel Management Central Personnel Data File as of January 2001.

² Executive Office of the President, Office of Management and Budget, "The President's Management Agenda," Fiscal Year 2002, pp. 12-15.

³ Memorandum to heads of executive departments and agencies on the implementation of the President's Management Agenda and presentation of the FY 2003 budget requests, from the Director of the Office of Management and Budget, Oct. 30, 2001.

⁴ U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "Competing for Federal Jobs: Job Search Experiences of New Hires," Washington, DC, February 2000, pp. 10-11.

⁵ In January 2003, OPM contracted out its USAJOBS website to Monster.com to make the site more visually appealing and easier to use. At the time of printing, changes to USAJOBS have not yet been implemented.

the jobs agencies announced, giving such information as job title, series, grade, who could apply, length of time the announcement would be open, duty location, and hiring agency.

- A survey conducted between January and April 2002 of 300 randomly selected human resources office staff members who posted vacancy announcements on USAJOBS in fiscal year 2001.⁶ Completed surveys were returned by more than half (55 percent) of the HR specialists who received the questionnaire.
- Content review of 100 randomly selected vacancy announcements posted on USAJOBS on March 6 and 7, 2002, to gauge the quality of Federal vacancy announcements. We reviewed only announcements that were open to all applicants, meaning open to both current Federal employees and to external applicants (i.e., those who did not work for the Federal Government). We included vacancy announcements from the five white-collar occupational groups—professional, administrative, technical, clerical, and other white-collar occupations—as well as announcements for blue-collar and Senior Exec-

utive Service positions. MSPB's five rating teams, each comprising two people, individually rated the overall quality of each of 20 vacancy announcements. Then the two members met in consensus sessions to determine their final ratings.

The rating teams used a scale of Good, Acceptable, and Poor in reviewing each vacancy announcement for overall quality based on its organization, readability, and use as a recruiting tool. In addition to rating overall quality, the raters examined more closely three critical sections of the vacancy announcements: duties of the position, how to apply, and qualifications required, including knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs). (KSAs are characteristics that agencies expect superior job applicants to have in addition to the Governmentwide qualification requirements that OPM has established.) We reviewed the utility and appropriateness of information and the instructions given in these sections of the announcements. Appendix A provides detailed descriptions of the elements used to rate the announcements.

⁶ To obtain a copy of the survey, write to the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, Office of Policy and Evaluation, Washington, DC 20419; call (202) 653-6772, extension 1350; or send an e-mail to studies@mspb.gov.

Roles of vacancy announcements

Federal vacancy announcements are comparable to the “Help Wanted” ads private companies post on store windows, in newspapers, or on web sites in that their main purpose is to draw people in to apply. But Federal vacancy announcements must also clearly reflect Federal public policies and comply with the mandates of the first merit system principle which states:

Recruitment should be from qualified individuals from appropriate sources in an endeavor to achieve a work force from all segments of society, and selection and advancement should be determined solely on the basis of relative ability, knowledge, and skills, after fair and open competition which assures that all receive equal opportunity.⁷

Recruiting

Recruitment is the effort or process used to attract applicants with the right qualifications for a job. While posting vacancy announcements is the required method of notification,⁸ agencies may—and many do—use methods to recruit that go beyond basic notification. These include paid advertising, contract recruiting firms, job fairs, and visits to schools and college campuses to inform potential applicants about Federal jobs and the organizations offering them. Nonetheless, because it’s required, the posting of vacancy announcements remains the primary method of notifying the

public of the Government’s job opportunities. For many job seekers these postings are the only available source of information about the position, the agency, and the Federal Government. Therefore, it is in the Government’s best interests for agencies to treat vacancy announcements as a key recruiting tool that presents the job, the agency, and the Government in the best possible light.

Complying with the merit principles

In addition to posting vacancy announcements to attract applicants, agencies use vacancy announcements to ensure that they are meeting the merit system principles’ requirement of “fair and open competition.” “Fair and open competition” requires that vacant positions be publicized for a period of time that gives job seekers the opportunity to apply for positions that they are interested in and for which they qualify. It also requires that applicants be informed of the basis on which they will be rated or assessed.

Hiring based on relative ability

Vacancy announcements are used to solicit information for the purpose of assessing candidates’ qualifications to do the job. Since the assessment is intended to ensure that selections (or advancements) are based solely on relative knowledge, ability, and skills of the applicants, vacancy announcements are to include information about

⁷ 5 U.S.C. § 2301(b)(1).

⁸ OPM requires agencies to post an announcement on USAJOBS for every vacant job that is to be filled for 121 days or more when they solicit applications from outside the agency’s or the Government’s workforce.

the KSAs required for the job. Based on the applicants' responses to vacancy announcements, agencies assess and rate applicants (assign numerical scores) in terms of the extent to which they possess the required KSAs, and then refer candidates to selecting officials based on those scores.

Providing adequate public notice

As noted above, vacancy announcements are meant to inform the public of job opportunities in the Federal Government and give interested applicants the opportunity and time to apply. Formal notification occurs when vacancies are posted on USAJOBS, which applicants can access 24 hours a day, 7 days a week by computer or telephone.⁹

Federal regulations require that Federal job vacancy announcements include, at a minimum, the following:¹⁰

1. A brief description of the position, including its title, series, pay plan, grade, duty location, and rate of pay.
2. Instructions on how to apply, including the date by which applications must be submitted and what information to file.
3. The name of the agency issuing the announcement and the announcement number.
4. The qualifications that are required, including knowledge, skills, and abilities.
5. The basis on which applicants will be rated.

6. Instructions on how to claim veterans preference, if applicable.
7. An equal opportunity statement.
8. A statement that reasonable accommodation is available for individuals with disabilities to help them apply for the job.
9. Information on how a displaced or soon-to-be-displaced Federal employee may apply under the Career Transition Assistance Program (CTAP) or Interagency Career Transition Assistance Program (ICTAP), including what the agency considers "well-qualified" for priority consideration under the program.¹¹

In addition to this basic information, agencies include other information that their employment policy dictates, or language required as a result of bargaining unit negotiations, equal employment case settlements, or other formal proceedings.

Supporting public policies

Vacancy announcements are intended to inform applicants of the Government's commitment to fairness and equal opportunity. They are also a means by which certain groups of applicants—such as veterans, displaced Federal employees, or people with disabilities—are informed of special hiring authorities designed to help them find Federal employment. The announcements inform such job seekers about how they can exercise their right to be considered through the special hiring authorities that apply to them.

⁹ USAJOBS can be accessed through <http://www.usajobs.opm.gov> on the World Wide Web and at (478) 757-3000 by telephone.

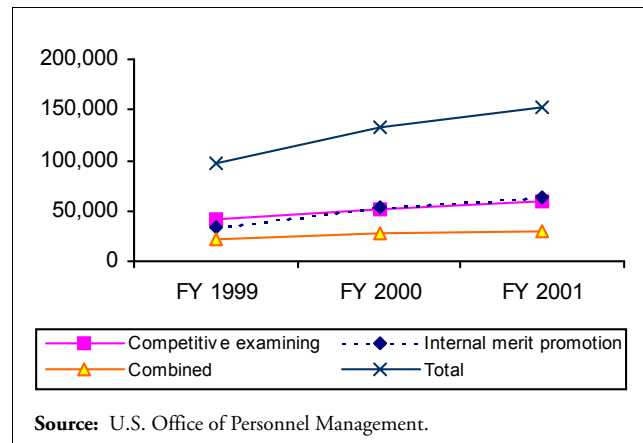
¹⁰ 5 C.F.R. § 330.707.

¹¹ CTAP and ICTAP were created during the height of the Government's downsizing in the early to mid-1990s to help surplus employees find jobs on their own within the Federal Government.

An overview of vacancy announcements posted in FY2001

After significantly reducing the size of its workforce during years of downsizing in the 1990s, the Government began to hire more employees than it separated starting in FY 2000 and continuing through FY 2001. This increased hiring is reflected in the number of vacancies announced during FY 1999 through FY 2001. In FY 2001, agencies posted over 150,000 announcements on USAJOBS, an increase of about 56 percent over FY 1999 (see fig. 1). However, the number of vacancy announcements posted on USAJOBS does not necessarily translate to the number of jobs actually vacant and filled. Sometimes agencies prepare and post more than one announcement for a vacancy: one to solicit applications from internal applicants and another for external applicants. And in some cases, vacancies might not be filled the first time they are announced and may, therefore, be announced a second time. Furthermore, a single vacancy announcement may cover multiple openings in either a specific occupation or within a broad occupational category.

Figure 1. Number of vacancy announcements posted on USAJOBS



Agencies used competitive examining or internal merit promotion announcements, or combined the two

There are two basic types of vacancy announcements: internal merit promotion and competitive examining announcements. Internal merit promotion vacancies are generally open to current or former Federal employees who have or had permanent appointments.¹² Vacancies in the competitive service that are filled through competitive examining are open to any qualified U.S. citizen and are

¹² These current or former employees are referred to as “internal” or “status” applicants. Internal merit promotion announcements may limit who is considered. For example, an announcement may be open to displaced or about-to-be-displaced employees only, to agency employees only, or to employees from other Federal agencies within the commuting area. When soliciting applications from Federal employees outside their own workforce, agencies also are obliged to accept applications from military veterans who are eligible under the Veterans Employment Opportunity Act.

not restricted to current or former Federal employees.¹³ Internal merit promotion and competitive examining processes have their own sets of rules, but both must observe the spirit of the first merit system principle. Competitive examining is distinct from internal merit promotion in two notable ways:

- Competitive examining is subject to a law that gives veterans, and certain family members of veterans, preference in hiring; and
- It is subject to a law that limits hiring consideration to the three candidates with the highest numerical scores (the Rule of Three). As an alternative to the Rule of Three, the Homeland Security Act of 2002¹⁴ permits agencies to use category ranking.¹⁵

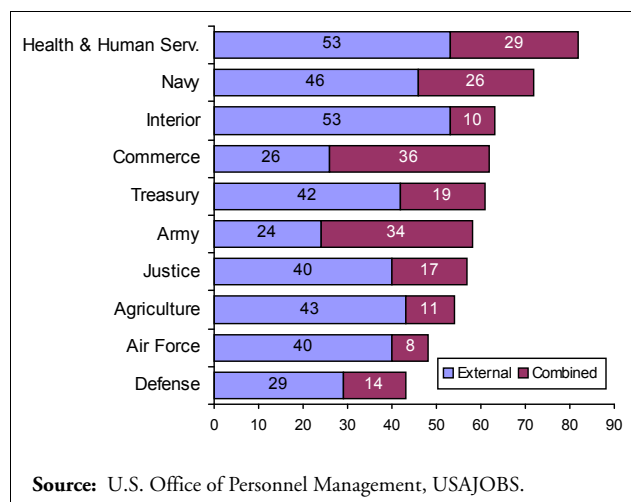
Agencies may, and often do, issue separate internal merit promotion and competitive examining announcements for the same position. Or, agencies may prepare a single vacancy announcement for both internal and external competitions. Because internal merit promotion and competitive examining have different requirements, combined announcements can easily confuse applicants, particularly external applicants who are unfamiliar with the Federal hiring process. OPM has cautioned agencies to give very clear instructions to applicants when the two kinds of announcements are combined.¹⁶ As figure 1 shows, about 30,000 combined internal merit promotion and competitive examining announcements were posted in FY 2001, about 32 percent more than in FY 1999.

Agencies opened jobs to external applicants

Including announcements where agencies combined competitive examining and internal merit

promotion processes into one announcement, more than 88,000 vacancy announcements posted on USAJOBS in FY 2001 were open to external applicants (see fig. 1). This was an increase of about 37 percent in the number of open announcements over FY 1999. However, our review of a sample of 10,000 vacancy announcement summaries that appeared in USAJOBS in FY 2001 indicates that agencies varied greatly in the extent to which they opened jobs to external applicants. For example, figure 2 shows that the Department of Health and Human Services opened a much higher percentage of their jobs to external applicants (82 percent) than the Departments of Defense (43 percent) and the Air Force (48 percent).

Figure 2. Top 10 agencies that opened their vacancy announcements to external applicants in FY 2001



Perhaps not surprisingly, agencies were more likely to consider external applicants at the entry-level than at higher grades. Seventy-four percent of jobs at grades 1 through 4 were open to external appli-

¹³ Applicants from outside the Federal Government are referred to as “external” or “nonstatus” applicants. They include Federal employees serving on temporary appointments or appointed in positions outside the competitive service. Current and former Federal employees may also apply under competitive examining. When they do, all the laws and regulations that govern competitive examining apply to them.

¹⁴ Public Law 107-296, Nov. 25, 2002.

¹⁵ Category rating is a method of rating that allows candidates to be grouped in two or more categories instead of ranked by numerical scores. All candidates within a group are treated as equally qualified. Veterans preference rules continue to apply in category rating.

¹⁶ U.S. Office of Personnel Management, “Delegated Examining Operations Handbook,” Washington, DC, October 1999, p. v-6.

cants, while 54 percent of announcements for grades 12 through 15 were open to external applicants. We also found that agencies were more likely to open their professional, technical, and clerical jobs to external applicants, while reserving more of their administrative jobs for internal applicants. Additionally, agencies operating under an alternative personnel system or demonstration project authority¹⁷ were more likely to consider external applicants than agencies with traditional personnel systems.

About half of the announcements were for professional and administrative jobs

Our review of the 10,000 vacancy announcement summaries showed that agencies announced a wide range of jobs in FY 2001. About half (54 percent) of the jobs were in the professional and administrative categories, and most of those were program/management analysts, information technology specialists, program administrators, and engineers. About a third of the jobs announced (36 percent) were technical and clerical jobs with the most common being office clerks (including office automation clerks) and secretaries. The remaining 10 percent were blue-collar and other types of jobs.

As table 1 shows, announced jobs started at various grade levels with technical and clerical jobs likely to be announced at grades GS-5 through 8 and professional and administrative jobs at grades GS-9 and above. In general, agencies announced fewer jobs at entry levels than at non-entry levels for all categories of jobs opened for both internal and external applicants. This suggests that agencies prefer to fill most of their vacancies with experienced workers rather than people just beginning their careers.

Half of vacancy announcements were open for 2 weeks or less

Providing adequate public notice ensures that interested individuals have the opportunity to apply. The minimum open period for competitive announcements is 5 business days, but agencies may establish shorter or longer open periods depending on the pool of candidates they want to attract or the number and quality of applicants likely to be available. The open period for internal merit promotion vacancy announcements depends on agencies' merit promotion plans, which in some agencies incorporate aspects of collective bargaining agreements, and vary from agency to agency. As figure 3 shows, half (52 percent) of the Federal vacancy announcements posted in FY 2001 were open for receipt of applications for 14 calendar days or less. Open periods were basically the same length for both external and internal announcements.

Table 1. Percent of vacancy announcements by occupational category and grade levels, FY 2001

Occupational category	Grade levels				
	1-4	5-8	9-11	12-15	Other*
Professional	7	12	37	42	2
Administrative	3	16	37	43	1
Technical	15	74	9	2	
Clerical	32	67	1		
Other	28	59	5	8	
Blue-Collar	23	43	30	2	2

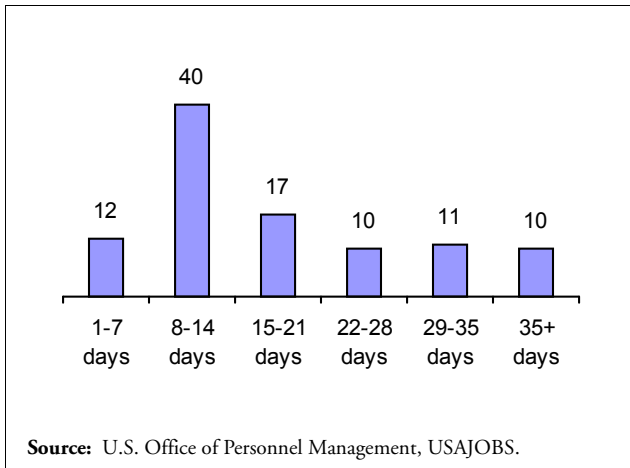
Source: Source: U.S. Office of Personnel Management, USAJOBS.

* "Other" includes demonstration projects, the Senior Executive Service, and pay plans other than the general schedule.

As we have noted, the public notice requirement is met when a vacancy announcement has been posted on USAJOBS. Currently, OPM requires

¹⁷ The Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 gave OPM and other Federal agencies the authority to test innovative approaches to human resources management under the act's demonstration project authority (5 U.S.C. 47). As of April 2002, the Department of Defense (Air Force, Army, and Navy laboratories and the DOD Acquisition Workforce), and the Department of Commerce had active demonstration projects. The Navy, the Department of Agriculture, and the National Institute of Standards and Technology now have alternative personnel systems that were tested under the demonstration project authority and were then made permanent through legislation.

Figure 3. Percent of vacancy announcements by open period, FY 2001

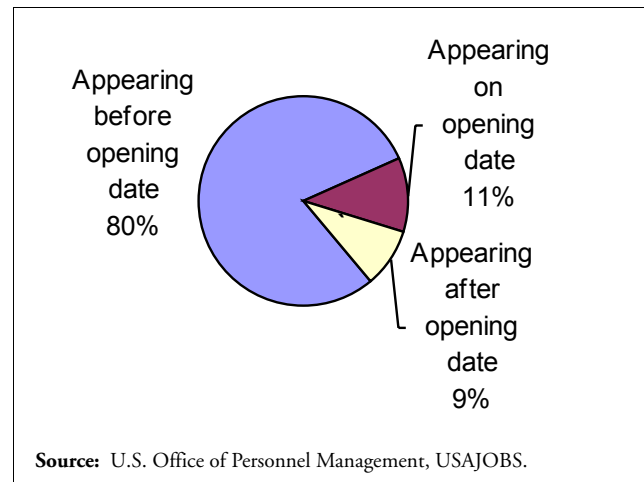


agencies to enter their announcements into the system by 4:00 p.m. Eastern Standard Time for appearance on USAJOBS the next day.¹⁸

Figure 4 shows that 9 percent of vacancy announcements did not appear on USAJOBS until after the announced opening date for receipt of applications. Notifying the public of the vacancy after the announcement has opened effectively reduces the number of days applicants have to learn of the vacancy, prepare materials, and submit their applications. This results in less publicity, and

worse, it can undermine the perception of “fair and open” competition, especially for announcements with short open periods. Even so, having an adequate open period is not in itself sufficient to meet the spirit of fairness and openness. It is not necessarily fair and open to post a job vacancy for 30 days, for example, but make the qualification requirements so narrow or the instructions so obscure that no one but an insider can successfully compete. These issues are discussed in more detail later in this report.

Figure 4. Vacancy announcements appearing on USAJOBS before and after the opening date

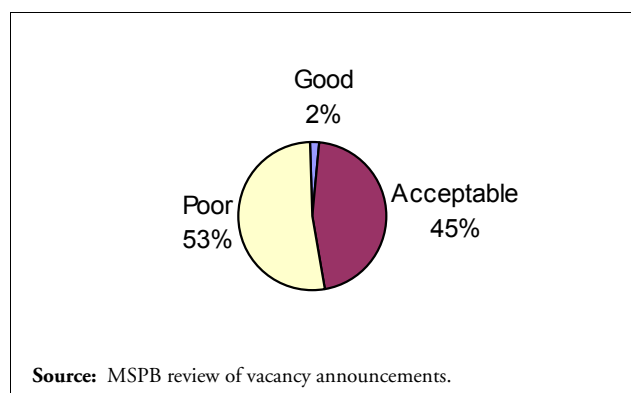


¹⁸ This time limit will not apply once USAJOBS migrates to the system maintained by Monster.com. Once entered, vacancy announcements will appear on USAJOBS in real time.

The current state of Federal vacancy announcements

The quality of Federal vacancy announcements directly affects the Government's ability to attract and hire the workers it needs to serve the American people. Depending on their quality, vacancy announcements can attract or repel qualified applicants. Because of vacancy announcements' importance in the Government's recruiting efforts at a time when a large number of employees are projected to retire, OPM has recently begun focusing more attention on the state of Federal vacancy announcements. In an April 2002 news release, OPM announced that it has collaborated with two employment experts to modernize vacancy announcements, and in a July memorandum to agencies' HR directors, OPM provided suggestions for writing effective job announcements.¹⁹ This brought much needed attention to the issue. Although some agencies are making improvements to their announcements, more needs to be done. One private sector consultant who advises applicants on how to apply for Federal jobs has asserted that Federal vacancy announcements are often unintelligible to first-time applicants.²⁰ Based on our systematic content review of a random sample of 100 vacancy announcements for jobs open to all applicants, we believe this to be true in far too many cases.

Figure 5. Ratings of vacancy announcements



The quality of vacancy announcements generally is not good

Our quality review of 100 vacancy announcements posted on USAJOBS found that just under half (45 percent) were “acceptable,” only 2 percent were “good” and the rest—53 percent—were poor (see fig. 5). Vacancy announcements rated acceptable were adequately organized and clear, but reviewers indicated that even these barely met the “acceptable” level because although these announcements were more organized and clear than the poor announcements, they generally made no effort to sell the jobs. This finding coupled with the “poor”

¹⁹ U.S. Office of Personnel Management, “OPM Expands Efforts to Modernize Job Vacancy Announcements,” news release, Apr. 29, 2002; Memorandum for human resources directors on improving job announcements, from Richard A. Whitford, OPM Acting Associate Director for Employment, July 15, 2002.

²⁰ Kathryn Kraemer Troutman, “Seven Ways to Fix Federal Hiring,” Sept. 20, 2001; and “Change your Vacancy Announcements Now,” Dec. 18, 2001, both at <http://www.resume-place.com/archives/>.

rating given to 53 percent of the announcements does not bode well for the Government's quest for talent. Our review of the vacancy announcements identified a number of different problems that represent common themes that cut across agencies and types of positions.

Common problems noted in vacancy announcements

Announcements read poorly

Many of the 100 vacancy announcements we reviewed read poorly, a shortcoming that can drive away applicants who have other choices in the labor market. The most common flaws were poor organization, poor writing, and overuse or ineffective use of templates and "canned" or standardized language.

Organization is poor

Many of the announcements suffered from disorganization and were much too long. For example, one vacancy announcement for medical officers included a multi-page section containing numerous items of information unrelated to one another. Much of the information was important but could easily be missed by applicants because of the disorganized presentation.

Misspelling and grammatical errors are common

In addition to disorganization, we found many misspelled words and grammatical errors in vacancy announcements. This sloppy writing can quickly create an image of the Government as unprofessional.

For example, we noted errors such as using *principle* for *principal*, *basic* for *basis*, and *it's* for *its*.²¹ In addition, statements such as one noting that there

is *0001 vacancies* to be filled contain an error (the plural *vacancies*) and do nothing to contribute to readability. According to some of our survey respondents, some problems such as this are related to USAJOBS' inflexibility or inability to check certain kinds of typographical mistakes. But grammatical mistakes and many of the spelling errors can't be attributed to the system's shortcomings. Those mistakes are more likely attributable to poor writing skills or the human resources office staffs' rush to get announcements published.

Jargon and acronyms are prevalent

We also noted the prevalence of jargon (e.g., *career/career-conditional appointment*²²) and undefined acronyms (e.g., *PCS*²³). Although useful when communicating information within an organization, jargon and acronyms are inappropriate when communicating outside the organization because the terms can be unfamiliar or have different meanings to different people. Moreover, their use suggests a closed process geared to insiders rather than thoughtful consideration of all applicants.

Templates and "canned" or standardized language are used ineffectively

Another common practice that contributes to poor readability is the ineffective use of templates or "canned" language. The size of HR staffs was reduced by almost 18 percent during the downsizing and restructuring of the Federal Government in the 1990s.²⁴ This loss of staff forced HR offices to employ new strategies to help them keep up with the work. One of these strategies was to automate portions of the staffing process, including preparing parts of vacancy announcements. Although writing vacancy announcements cannot be wholly automated, much information is common among announcements, such as statements about equal

²¹ In this report, we used italics to signify direct quotes.

²² "Career" or "career-conditional" appointment pertains to the employment tenure given to employees with permanent appointments. The first 3 years of an employee's initial appointment is "career-conditional," after which it becomes "career."

²³ "PCS" is an abbreviation for "permanent change of station," which means a permanent move or transfer of an employee to another duty location.

²⁴ U.S. Office of Personnel Management, "Human Resources Employment Trends: An Occupation in Transition," Washington, DC, September 1999, p. 4.

employment opportunity or where to send applications. To save time and to ensure consistency, many HR offices have developed vacancy announcement templates and standardized language.

To help agencies post vacancy announcements on USAJOBS, OPM has developed a data-entry form that includes standardized statements that agencies may use, such as language on who can claim veterans preference or on accommodating applicants with disabilities. OPM offers short and long versions of the same information. To use OPM's suggested statements, the HR office staff members who prepare vacancy announcements simply select which ones to include in their announcements. The use of templates and standardized language can ensure consistency and can make writing vacancy announcements faster, but there are disadvantages when these aids to efficiency are used thoughtlessly. For example, we found that sometimes HR office staffs select statements from the USAJOBS data-entry template that are duplicated in the agency's template—so statements appear twice, although sometimes worded slightly differently. This and other errors make Federal announcements too long, confusing, repetitive, and replete with irrelevant and unnecessary information. Here are some examples:

Veterans Preference is not a factor for Senior Executive Service jobs or when competition is limited to status candidates (current or former Federal career or career-conditional employees). [From an administrative program assistant grade 6/7 vacancy announcement]

The reference to the Senior Executive Service is irrelevant to this job. The announcement should clearly say veterans' preference rules apply.

PRE-EMPLOYMENT REQUIREMENTS: Selectees may be required to successfully complete a probationary period, obtain a security clearance, and meet all certification requirements (depending on the position to be filled) prior to appointment. Some positions may require successful completion of a physical examination, agility test, pre-employment drug test and/or participation in the Anthrax vaccine immunization program if applying for an emergency essential position. Selectees required to meet one or more of these employment conditions before appointment will receive a tentative offer of employment. [From a computer specialist grade 12 vacancy announcement]

Depending on where this job is located in the agency, some of these pre-employment requirements, such as the agility test, may not apply. The plural "Selectees" (twice) and the qualifier "Some positions" are also confusing since the announcement was for only one vacancy. The parenthetical "depending on the position to be filled" indicates the likelihood that this is canned language the agency didn't bother to adjust, as does "if applying for an emergency essential position."

EDUCATION: If this position requires education to meet basic requirements or you are seeking to qualify based on education or a combination of education/experience, you must submit college transcript. [From an associate research molecular biologist grade 7 vacancy announcement]

The word "if" is inappropriate here because this job does require a specific level and type of education. Even if it didn't, it's not helpful to applicants to make them search through the announcement to figure out whether the position requires education and, therefore, whether a transcript is required.

The use of templates and canned language saves time for the human resources office and ensures consistency, which is desirable from both a legal perspective and the perspective of the applicant in need of sound information. However, these advantages are lost if they force applicants to contact HR for clarification (which wastes the time of both applicants and HR). Nor is it effective if highly qualified applicants do not apply because they find the announcement too confusing or so obviously thrown together carelessly that it repels rather than attracts them.

Announcements are weak recruiting tools

To be useful as a recruiting tool, vacancy announcements should be attractive, easy to read and understand, and have a friendly and pleasant tone. Readers must be immediately engaged or they will not read the entire announcement. A sample vacancy announcement that complies with OPM's current requirements and includes many of the desirable attributes we highlight in this report appears in appendix B.

As noted earlier, although we rated almost half of the vacancy announcements as "acceptable," many barely met this level because they did little to sell

the jobs. Part of the problem could be USAJOBS' system limitations that make tailoring difficult. Equally problematic is the fact that vacancy announcements on USAJOBS generally look unattractive, although to be fair, some do have better layouts than others. (This problem on appearance may be resolved when USAJOBS migrates to the system maintained by Monster.com.) Still, the problems we found were not so much caused by the limitations of USAJOBS as by the contents of the announcements themselves.

Job titles and duties are unclear

Job titles. Generally, applicants search for jobs by job titles. Certain occupations are easy to search for because they have standard job titles in the public and private sector, such as nurse, secretary, or engineer. But the Government has many positions that have no counterpart in the private sector. When appropriate, it would be useful to include in the announcement not only the job classification title but also an organizational title that is more descriptive of what the job entails. For example, "Program Analyst (Missile Defense Systems)" would be more helpful than the classification title "Program Analyst." Agencies should also be more careful and precise when titling their jobs. For example, an announcement for an *Assistant Crossing and Trespasser Regional Manager* sounds as if the agency is looking for someone to manage assistant crossings (whatever they might be) and trespassers.

Duties. Most of the "duties" sections of vacancy announcements we reviewed were poorly written. Most made little attempt to make the job interesting. "Duties" appear to be almost always verbatim excerpts of official position descriptions or classification standards. Descriptions are wordy and jargon-laden yet vague, making it difficult to determine what the person would be doing in the job. Moreover, they contain overly long sentences and are written in a tone that is impersonal and sometimes even pretentious. The following examples illustrate some of these problems:

The incumbent serves as the Senior Network Engineer who reports to the Director of the Information Systems Depart-

ment and is responsible for the new design, configuration, analytical and evaluation duties relating to computer networks and/or telecommunications with primary knowledge requirements of information processing methodology, information technology, computer capabilities and processing techniques. Receives network, communications and related operating systems from various sources and ensures that an inventory of all network hardware and software is maintained. Serves as the lead Network person on operating systems and/or application software projects and ensures that current releases of software products are in use. . . [From a computer specialist grade 12 vacancy announcement]

A confusing and vague description. Shorter sentences and clear, simpler writing are needed along with some explanation or identification of the network or telecommunication systems involved.

Participates in the building fire prevention and inspection program of the area served, insuring that all assigned buildings are [sic] structures are inspected for fire hazards on a scheduled basis in accordance with established elements of the fire risks and hazards in buildings under rehabilitation and/or alterations to insure the operations meet the requirements of the National Fire Codes, existing orders and depot requirements. [From a fire protection inspector grade level 6 vacancy announcement]

This rambling statement never specifies that the selectee will actually perform fire inspections. Also, it provides information that is unnecessary at this stage (e.g., "the area served" and "assigned buildings"). The following is more to the point, less wordy, and free of several writing or typing mistakes: "In accordance with the National Fire Codes, inspects building for fire risks during construction and renovation."

Minimum qualification requirements are not specific

For all jobs in the Government, OPM has developed a set of minimum qualification standards that describe job requirements in broad terms but are not sufficient for purposes of announcing jobs. OPM has informed agencies that the standards described in OPM's qualifications handbook are not sufficiently specific to be used directly in examining or to be quoted in vacancy announcements.²⁵ Unfortunately, we found many of the announcements used OPM's qualification standards defini-

²⁵ U.S. Office of Personnel Management, "General Policies and Instructions: Qualification Standards for General Schedule Positions," at <http://opm.gov/qualifications/SEC-II/s2-a-b.htm>, Sept. 14, 2001, Part B 2.

tions without further specification. For example, a job for administrative support assistant grade 6 defined specialized experience as follows: *Experience that demonstrated the knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform the work of the position to be filled. To be creditable, specialized experience must have been at least equivalent to the next lower grade level in the normal line of progression for the occupation of the organization.*

This definition presupposes that applicants know about the Federal classification and qualification standards and the organization's line of advancement. Although applicants could find the classification and qualification standards with patience and some effort (OPM posts the classification and qualification standards on the Web and agency recruiting offices may have copies available for review), it is unreasonable to expect most applicants to know an organization's normal line of advancement. And it's unfair to expect applicants to learn what the line of advancement or the classification and qualification standards are in the short period that they have to apply. It would be much more helpful and appealing if announcements described the agency's specific requirements for the actual vacancy in a simple, straightforward manner. For example, in the specialized experience passage cited in the preceding paragraph, stating that applicants should have experience ordering office equipment and supplies would have made the passage more useful and helpful for the applicant.

Announcements are negative and even threatening

Our raters also noted that many vacancy announcements use negative language and tone that could very likely deter and even insult many qualified applicants. Some threaten applicants with nonconsideration, dismissal, or imprisonment if they lie on their application. It's almost as if applicants are assumed to be untruthful and so are warned of the consequences of lying even before they have decided to apply. Here are examples of some of the threats or negative language we found:

If you make a false statement in any part of your application, you may not be hired; you may be fired after you begin work; or you may be subject to fine, imprisonment or other

disciplinary action. [From a laborer grade 2 vacancy announcement]

If the warning must appear, the following could be much less threatening and adversarial and more inviting: "Please help us hire the best applicant by giving us complete and accurate information. Federal job applicants who make a false statement in any part of the application could be turned down for the job; fired after beginning work; or subject to fine, imprisonment, or other disciplinary action."

Please note: If a determination is made that you have rated yourself higher than is supported by your description of experience and/or education or that your application is incomplete, the following process will take place. The application will be returned to you unrated with an explanation that the narrative does not support the self-report. Your application will receive no further consideration for this announcement OR you may submit additional materials by [date]. [From a quality assurance specialist grade 09/11 vacancy announcement]

Agencies have the right to ensure that self-ratings are consistent with stated qualifications. But agencies should be more direct and diplomatic when informing applicants of this policy. For example, this paragraph could begin with: "Please note: Your rating will be based on both your responses to the questionnaire and information stated in your application. Please make sure that your self-ratings are supported by information in your application."

With warnings and threats peppering vacancy announcements, it would not be surprising if some applicants gave up their job search before they began. Negative language and threats belittle applicants, tarnish the Government's image, and can drive applicants away. To be effective, vacancy announcements should present information in as positive and appealing a way as possible. And using the word "please" on occasion is not a bad idea.

Announcements are not applicant-centered

Burdensome requirements. Almost all of the vacancy announcements we reviewed required applicants to submit a complete application package by the closing date of the announcement. In addition, most announcements require that applicants submit separate application packages for each of the hiring methods (i.e., merit promotion and competitive examining), for each special appoint-

ing authority,²⁶ or for each cut-off date of an open-continuous announcement for which they wish to be considered. This sounds like a reasonable requirement until one considers what a “complete application package” usually includes and notes that the open period is 2 weeks or less for half of the announcements.

The following are some of the most common pieces of information agencies require in a “complete application package”:

- An application, using either a resume, or one of two application forms, the Optional Form (OF) 612, or the Standard Form (SF) 171;²⁷
- Narrative responses to the knowledge, skills, and abilities requirements listed on the announcement or responses to a self-rating questionnaire;
- Proof of military service, if claimed;
- Proof of service-connected disabilities or certification of disabilities, if claimed;
- Proof of Federal service, if claimed;
- A copy of the most current performance appraisal if the applicant is a current Federal employee;
- College transcripts, including certification of U.S. equivalency if the education was obtained in another country; and

- A letter showing that the applicant is a Federal employee due to be displaced, or proof of displacement if the applicant is claiming priority placement under the Federal Government’s career transition assistance programs.

While an application is always required to apply for a Federal job,²⁸ agencies typically ask for additional documentation depending on the assessment method they will use and the proof they need to determine eligibility to apply. For agencies that use training/education and work experience (commonly referred to as the T&E rating method) to assess qualifications, applicants are usually required to write narratives on how their work experience and training meet the job’s knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs).²⁹ The number of KSAs typically ranges from three to eight. In a previous study, we found that applicants consider this requirement to be burdensome and repetitive (that is, these essays repeat information already given in their application or resume).³⁰ Responding to multiple-choice questionnaires can be less burdensome but some questionnaires, especially the one currently used for entry-level professional and administrative jobs covered by the Administrative Careers With America (ACWA) exam,³¹ can nevertheless be quite time consuming. That self-rating questionnaire is very

²⁶ Persons who may be considered for noncompetitive appointment include Veteran’s Readjustment Appointment (VRA) eligibles, veterans who are 30% or more disabled, Peace Corps or VISTA volunteers who left the service within the preceding year, certain former overseas Federal employees who returned stateside within the preceding 3 years, certain National Guard technicians separated within the preceding year, severely physically disabled or mentally impaired individuals, and veterans who have been separated from the armed forces under honorable conditions after 3 years or more of continuous service.

²⁷ The SF 171 was made obsolete in December 1995 with the adoption of OF 612. However, applicants may still use the SF 171 to apply for Federal jobs.

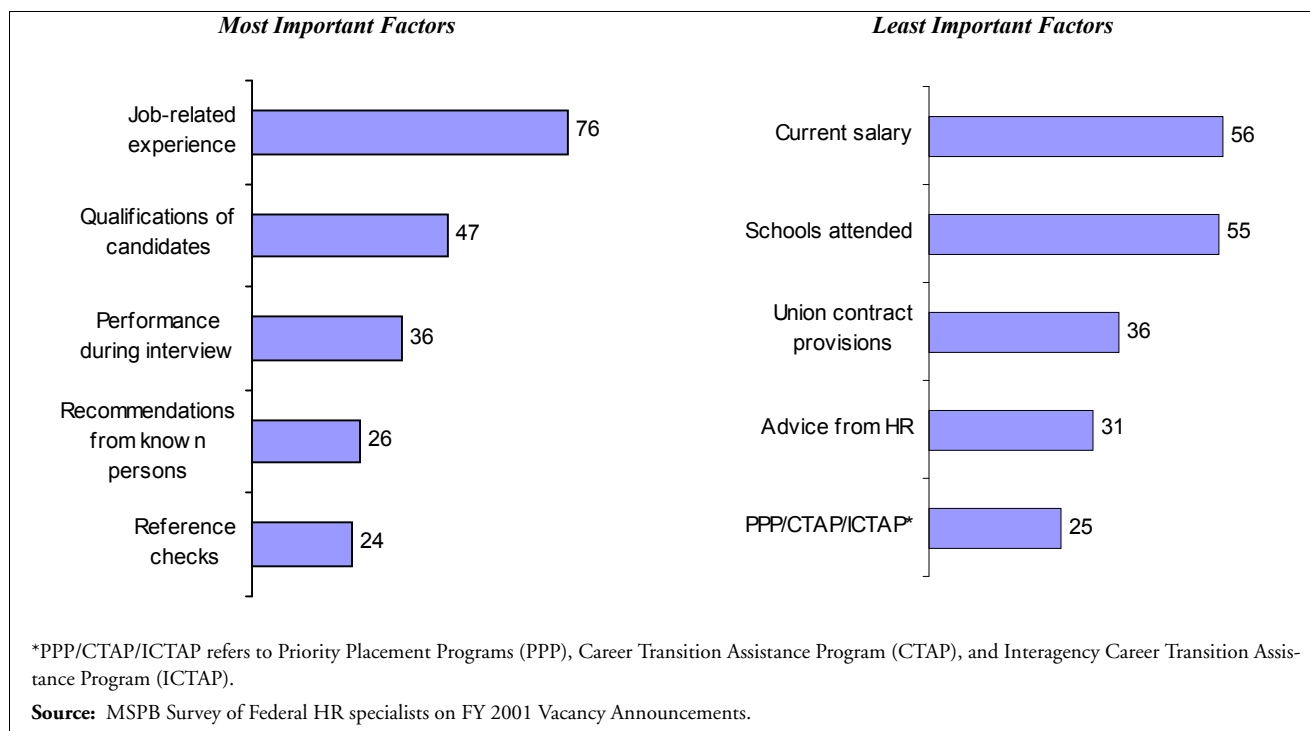
²⁸ Some agencies maintain resumes in databases. Those that do usually require applicants to submit a self-nomination (in writing, by FAX, or e-mail) to be considered for a job.

²⁹ Agencies using automated systems to perform T&E ratings typically don’t require narrative statements in addition to the application form or resume.

³⁰ U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, “Competing for Federal Jobs: Job Search Experiences of New Hires,” p. 14.

³¹ Prior to the ACWA exam, OPM administered the Professional and Administrative Examination (PACE), which was abolished under a consent decree entered into in a case alleging that the examination discriminated against, and had adverse impact on, Hispanic and African-American applicants based on test bias. OPM ultimately replaced the PACE with an exam that had a cognitive test portion and a biodata component. This was called the Administrative Careers With America, or ACWA written test. OPM subsequently replaced the ACWA written test with a self-rating instrument also called ACWA. However, the ACWA written test remains in OPM’s inventory of assessment tools if an organization wants to use it. The self-rating version of the ACWA that is currently being used expanded the biodata component of the ACWA written test. For more information about the PACE and the abolishment of the exam, see the following MSPB reports: “Report on the Significant Actions of OPM During 1982,” December 1983; “Entering Professional Positions in the Federal Government,” April 1994; and “Restoring Merit to Federal Hiring: Why Two Special Hiring Programs Should be Ended,” January 2000.

Figure 6. Percent of supervisors and managers indicating the importance of various factors when hiring from outside the Federal workforce



lengthy, comprising more than 140 questions. But even though responding to questionnaires or writing essays focused on KSAs can be a burden, and unnecessary for making basic qualification determinations, many agencies do not want to postpone obtaining this information until those not basically qualified are screened out. They want all the information up-front.

Based on our review of vacancy announcements, agencies appear unwilling to make basic qualification and eligibility determinations without supporting documentation. The requirement to submit college transcripts and certification of U.S. equivalency for foreign education during the initial application stage are examples of how HR makes the process cumbersome. Almost always, human resources offices require that all documents be submitted during the open period and most agencies have a policy of not considering applicants who do not submit all of the paperwork up-front. This HR policy is designed with the HR office in mind, rather than the applicant. Its objective is having fewer applicants to rate rather than helping the manager get a broader and better applicant pool.

The requirement for so much paperwork in order to apply seems to test applicants' endurance when an endurance test is unnecessary. Our research suggests that often, the rigors of the application process do little to improve the actual assessment of candidates' qualifications or to help selecting officials make better informed selection decisions. In the Board's 1997 survey of Federal supervisors and managers, supervisors indicated that the information most important to them when hiring from outside the Federal workforce is the applicants' job-related experience (see fig. 6). Information such as schools attended or eligibility for priority placement is the least important. Yet, almost all announcements require applicants to provide information about their schools and to submit their transcripts even though these may not be necessary for eligibility or qualification determinations or for selection decisions.

Agencies may be losing qualified candidates with their unwieldy application processes. As noted, applicants find writing essays about their KSAs burdensome enough. Requiring unnecessary documentation or requiring documentation at an earlier stage than necessary places a burden on applicants

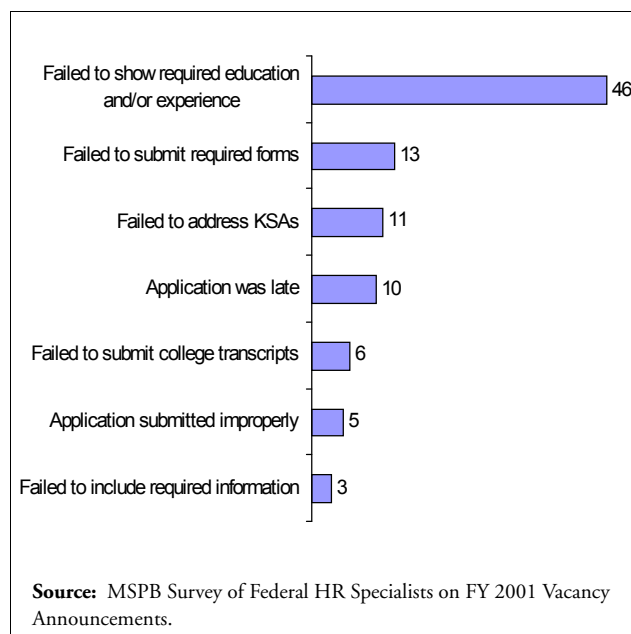
that is contrary to the Government's policy of keeping paperwork requirements to a minimum.³²

The Board recognizes that requiring so much information and documentation or submission of multiple application packages during the application phase of the hiring process is at times unavoidable. For example, agencies that have to fill certain jobs immediately may not be able to delay receipt of application materials until later in the process. We also recognize that HR specialists may feel more confident that their qualifications and eligibility determinations are correct if they have as much information as possible in their hands from the start. The first two are valid reasons for requiring that applicants submit a complete application package up-front, and the third one is understandable. However, agencies must find a balance between what they need to determine qualifications and eligibility and the burden they put on job applicants. Also, agencies that lack the technology that would allow them to delay receipt of some documentation should try to upgrade their tools.

Vague instructions. To be most useful, vacancy announcements should be written with a targeted group of applicants in mind. Additionally, announcements should be simple and easy to understand to make it more likely that qualified applicants will apply correctly and unqualified applicants will rule themselves out. Our survey shows that many unqualified or ineligible individuals apply. Others—both qualified and unqualified—apply but fail to follow instructions. As figure 7 shows, the most common reasons applicants were eliminated from competition was their failure to show the required education and/or experience.

Why do unqualified applicants apply and why do applicants fail to comply with instructions? One reason may be applicants' difficulty in understanding the vacancy announcement. In fact, our review found many of the instructions on how to apply vague, confusing, and contradictory. For example, in one announcement's minimum qualifications section applicants were told to submit college tran-

Figure 7. Reasons applicants were disqualified or rated ineligible, in percent



scripts, only to find later in the announcement that transcripts were not mandatory.

Poor service and limited methods to apply. The vacancy announcements we reviewed showed that some agencies limit the service they provide to applicants or the way they will accept applications. Statements such as *Don't call; No attempts will be made by the personnel office to obtain missing documents; Form requests will not be honored; We will not make copies; We WILL NOT accept FAX; If you fail to submit a COMPLETE on-line resume, you WILL NOT be considered. . . Paper applications WILL NOT be accepted. . .* are common in vacancy announcements. Perhaps these practices are HR offices' attempts to operate more efficiently in the face of staff shortages, but they are not likely to encourage applicants to apply. They also do nothing to improve the Government's image as an employer of choice.

Agencies have a right to set boundaries, but they should not cut too many corners. For example, the refusal to talk on the phone with applicants can be viewed as unwillingness to be helpful, or even as a lack of interest in whether anybody applies for the

³² P.L. 104-13, Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995.

job. This unwillingness can also convey the idea that Government offices are so hectic, pressure-ridden, and short-handed they can't even deal with applicants' legitimate inquiries. Some direct access to HR staff is necessary to assist applicants who have met a roadblock in the process and require the answer to a legitimate question.

Agencies' practice of accepting only electronic applications is not only unhelpful but also a questionable employment practice. Limiting receipt of applications to this one method is not a mark of a truly open competitive process as required by the first merit system principle. In a March 2002 memorandum, OPM's director reminded agencies that they may require submission of applications in a particular format or form, but must not require only electronic submission. Electronic filing is encouraged, but agencies must provide alternative methods for those who do not have Internet access.³³ This is a useful reminder. Although Internet access has increased since we first noted its use to search for jobs,³⁴ a large proportion of American adults still aren't connected.³⁵ Thus, multiple methods of accepting applications are needed to ensure that any interested applicant can apply.

Announcements are focused on observing laws and regulations

As stated earlier, our review found vacancy announcements to be focused more on the legal aspects of the hiring process than on selling the job, the agency, or the Government. In fact, HR staff members who responded to our survey agreed. Almost all of our survey respondents (97 percent) indicated that their vacancy announcements help them comply with legal and regulatory requirements, while only about half (48 percent) indicated that vacancy announcements are effective in informing applicants about their agencies' missions.

Using vacancy announcements to comply with legal and regulatory requirements is appropriate but should not be carried to such extremes that it becomes a detriment to recruiting. For example, many vacancy announcements provide overly long descriptions of programs and procedures for displaced Federal employees. Announcements also often include excessive detail on who is eligible for veterans preference. While it is important that individuals eligible for special consideration for Federal employment are afforded all the benefits of their eligibility, they should be informed in a way that does not disrupt the flow of information for other job seekers. For example, it would be better to alert applicants to specific programs that may apply to them with a short instruction on where to go for more information than to include detailed information that might be irrelevant or confusing to others.

We also found numerous vacancy announcements that sound overly legalistic, citing public law, regulations, and executive orders. For example, some vacancy announcements cite the Privacy Act, PL 93-579 to show agencies' right to obtain certain information, Executive Order 9397 to show why applicants must provide their social security number, or 39 U.S.C. § 415 to explain why applicants must not send their applications in Government-franked envelopes. In addition to citing the law or regulation, the announcements warn applicants, sometimes repeatedly, about the consequences of failure to observe these rules (e.g., they might not be considered for the job or they could be sent to jail). Who can blame applicants who object to this sort of treatment and therefore decide not to apply?

Such heavy reliance on the legalities associated with hiring suggests that some HR staffs may be more worried about possible litigation than about giving sufficient consideration to attracting applicants. And this concern has some basis. HR offices

³³ Memorandum from Kay Coles James, Director of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management, to heads of departments and agencies, on agencies' responsibilities to recruit and assess high-quality candidates, Mar. 25, 2002.

³⁴ U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "Competing for Federal Jobs: Job Search Experiences of New Hires," pp. 8-9.

³⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, "Home Computers and Internet Use in the United States: August 2000," Special Studies, Washington, DC, September 2001.

undergo periodic inspections both from agency HR organizations and OPM. These inspections include looking for deficiencies or violations of policies or regulations. When an HR office has been cited for noncompliance, staffs may be loath to run that risk again and could adopt a compliance-oriented approach to most of what they do. HR staffs' approach may also be affected by their concern that applicants can—and some do—question the process and file complaints. Applicants have successfully sued potential employers for many different reasons, ranging from the use of discriminatory words in advertisements to promises that were

implied, but not met.³⁶ Rather than worry about lawsuits to the detriment of recruiting, HR should treat legal and recruiting needs as complementary. HR need not provide every detail about legal and regulatory requirements in the vacancy announcement but instead could impart much of this information to applicants as the process moves along. If laws and regulations must be cited in vacancy announcements, such references can be expressed in a careful and courteous manner that would encourage applicants to follow instructions when applying.

³⁶ Phillip M. Perry, "Bulletproofing Your Help Wanted Ads," VNU Business Media, vol. 126, No. 26, June 26, 1993, pp. 32-34.

Other areas of concern

Many of the problems identified in this study are actually symptoms of other, more complicated problems faced by the Government's staffing system. If sufficient attention is not paid to these issues, it will be difficult for many agencies to dramatically improve their vacancy announcements. As a consequence, the Government's efforts to hire a highly skilled and productive workforce could be jeopardized and the merit system principles undermined. In this section, we summarize some of the other issues raised by our review of Federal vacancy announcements.

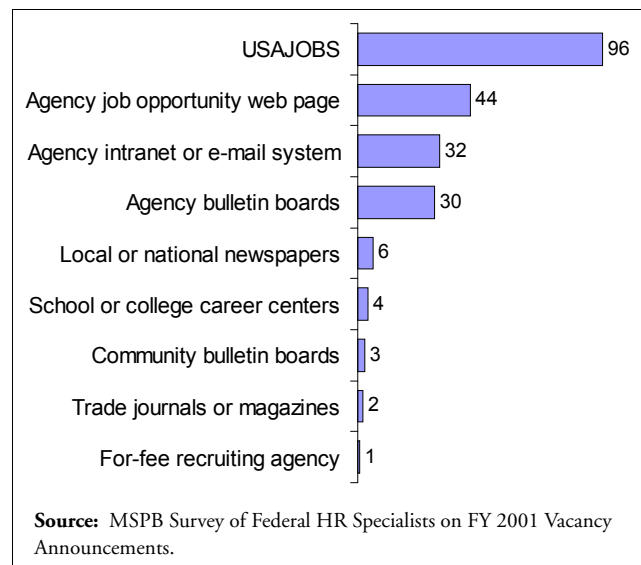
Agencies lack a comprehensive recruiting strategy

The vacancy announcements we reviewed suggest that many agencies lack a comprehensive recruiting strategy that would help them attract highly qualified applicants. There are several aspects to this issue, as discussed below.

Exclusive reliance on USAJOBS to announce jobs

There are many ways agencies can announce their job openings in addition to the required one on USAJOBS (see fig. 8). However, our survey of HR specialists revealed that agencies rely almost exclusively on USAJOBS. For example, less than half (44 percent) of our HR survey respondents indicated that they post job announcements on their own agency's web site and just 32 percent indicated that they use their agency's e-mail system to announce job openings to their own employees.

Figure 8. Media agencies used to publicize vacancies, in percent



By not using other tools in addition to USAJOBS, agencies may miss the opportunity to attract potential applicants. Agencies that don't post their announcements on their own web sites may miss alerting their web site visitors to job openings. Not telling their employees about vacancies means that agencies can't energize their own employees to act as recruiters. This is a particularly important concern since in our study on new Federal employees' job search experiences, we found that the most common way employees first learn about their jobs is through friends and relatives, many of whom, no doubt, are Federal employees.³⁷ It would certainly be to agencies' advantage to make greater use of

³⁷ U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "Competing for Federal Jobs: Job Search Experiences of New Hires," p. 7.

these two additional broadcast tools and other tools that would enhance their recruiting efforts.

Using one announcement for a broad range of jobs

Some agencies issue a single vacancy announcement for a broad range of jobs (both clerical and professional) belonging to an occupational group, e.g., all positions classified in the GS-600 occupational group (the health care group), which includes doctors, dentists, nurses, pharmacists, medical records clerks, and other health care workers. These announcements are usually open to both internal and external applicants, and their purpose is to build applicant inventories. The announcements are generally open for receipt of applications for 6 months to a year, and cover all grade levels from grade 1 or 2 to 15. By their very nature, these announcements describe the jobs and qualification requirements in very general terms. For example, this is how the duties were described in an announcement for the health care occupational group.

Duties: This group includes all classes of positions the duties of which are to advise on, administer, supervise, or perform research or other professional and scientific work, subordinate technical work, or related clerical work in the several branches of medicine, dietetics, nursing, occupational therapy, physical therapy, pharmacy and others.

The announcement went on to list 38 job titles ranging from medical officers to medical records clerks. Obviously, the strategy was to cast the widest net possible to see who would be caught. At first glance this strategy looks efficient, since only one announcement is prepared for a large number of positions. Further, even if a large number of applicants were to apply, the large volume of applications would not be a problem because the agency uses an automated system that supposedly can screen applicants and identify qualified ones in a matter of minutes. However, the announcement may not be effective for several reasons:

- It is confusing, especially to external applicants who are unfamiliar with the Federal hiring process.
- It may create expectations that can't be met. Because it appears that so many employees are being sought, applicants may anticipate all sorts of job offers soon after they apply. If no offers come and the applicants receive no feedback, they might conclude that the Government's hiring process is too slow and they could lose interest. Such situations do not create an image of the Government as an employer of choice.
- It has the potential to mislead applicants. For example, one announcement for *Recreation or Creative Arts Therapist* listed the job's grade as *GS-02/15*. It is unlikely that any employees hired through this announcement have promotion potential to GS-15. But applicants who are unfamiliar with the Government's announcement practices and promotion policies may think they do.
- It does little to motivate applicants to apply. Generally, applicants apply for specific jobs that meet their needs, interest, and qualifications. Announcements with no specific information about the job don't give them any basis on which to decide to apply.

Canceling announcements

Another practice that we found troubling is the frequent cancellation of vacancy announcements. Some 42 percent of the HR specialists who responded to our survey indicated that their vacancy announcements did not result in selection. The most common reason they gave for the non-selection was the cancellation of the announcement (32 percent).

Announcements are cancelled for various reasons, but regardless of the reason, cancelled announcements have unintended consequences. They are a huge disappointment for applicants who devoted so much time, effort, and even money (for ordering transcripts, making copies, etc.) to applying. Cancellations can also give the impression that the Government doesn't know what it's doing. But of more concern is that cancellations suggest that HR specialists are devoting too much time to doing

something with no apparent results. The relatively high rate of cancellation also suggests that HR and program managers need to better plan their recruitment strategies to avoid unnecessary work.

HR specialists create vacancy announcements in response to program managers' hiring needs and requests. Program managers know their jobs better than HR. Unfortunately, some HR specialists have indicated to us that many of their program managers spend little time working with HR in planning recruiting strategies, identifying requisite skills, and developing assessment strategies. More often than not, program managers involve themselves in administrative, non-value-added tasks, such as signing requests for personnel actions. Such minimal involvement may be due to program managers' lack of knowledge of the hiring process and the belief that they're leaving it up to the experts (i.e., HR). However, program managers' lack of involvement in the recruiting process can result in poorly described jobs or inappropriate assessment criteria. This increases the likelihood that the managers will cancel the vacancy because they are dissatisfied with the quality of the applicants referred to them.

Effective human resources management depends upon a partnership between program managers and HR staffs. Members of both groups need to work as a team, sharing the responsibility for success. Until this is achieved, many of the problems we identify in this report will likely remain unaddressed.

Using technology ineffectively

Some HR professionals do not view USAJOBS as a recruiting tool. They use it simply because they are required to post their vacancy announcements there. Some HR specialists who responded to our survey expressed the wish that posting jobs on USAJOBS be made optional since they already post their announcements on their agency's web site. Where USAJOBS is not viewed as a tool that can help to recruit, agencies are not inclined to use the system's full capabilities to present a good, clear, attractive announcement.

Vacancy announcements began as paper notices posted in post offices to let people know when a

competitive examination was to be held. Agencies posted internal merit promotion announcements on their bulletin boards to let their employees know when vacancies occurred. This paper-based system of announcing jobs was overtaken by technology when USAJOBS went onto the World Wide Web in the mid 1990s. Even so, OPM's regulations governing vacancy announcements are still oriented toward a paper system. This situation prevents agencies from taking full advantage of technology to modify their approach to preparing vacancy announcements. Hence, vacancy announcements posted on USAJOBS still read and look as if they are in a paper system, as this example shows:

Please check ONE item in each section that best reflects your situation. Your responses are subject to verification should you be appointed. A complete description of these factors can be found on page 5 of the announcement. [From an analyst grade 9/11 vacancy announcement]

This announcement was not adapted for the medium in which it appeared. USAJOBS uses the hypertext markup language (HTML) to publish documents in the World Wide Web. Since HTML does not recognize pagination, instructing applicants to go to a certain page is not only pointless but shows a failure to adapt paper to electronic format.

Another troubling practice that highlights inadequate use of available technology is including in vacancy announcements lengthy instructions on what a resume must contain. In many vacancy announcements, the long lists describing information that applicants must supply in order to apply contain much of the same information that was required by the SF 171, which was discontinued in 1995 because it was considered too burdensome. To make applying for Federal jobs less taxing, especially for external applicants, the use of resumes was allowed in place of the SF 171. But many announcements require the same information in a resume that the SF 171 once required, which undermines the benefit gained from using a resume. The burden remains and the vacancy announcement itself is cluttered with paragraphs

—or pages—listing information that applicants must include to be considered for a job. This problem of severely cluttered announcements could be addressed by a more efficient use of web technology. A link from the vacancy announcement to a web page located in USAJOBS or to an agency web site containing the additional details about what information is needed to apply would suffice. Unfortunately, agencies have not fully used the power of USAJOBS on the Web.

It is worth noting here that in contrast to USAJOBS, some agency web sites we have visited display vacancy announcements that are user-friendly. For example, instead of overloading the announcement with information, these agencies use their own systems to link to different web pages that contain the details applicants might need. This way, applicants are presented with manageable amounts of information and need select only the pages they want to read. This is a step in the right direction that all agencies should aim for. Still, agencies need to focus more on applicants' perspective when developing or revising their web sites and must tailor their recruiting strategy to the job being filled. As we mentioned earlier in the report, this may mean using other methods, in addition to posting announcements on the Web, to recruit job candidates.

During the time we conducted our study, OPM continued to make improvements to USAJOBS. More improvements are forthcoming as OPM develops and implements its Recruitment One-Stop Project, including the contracting out of USAJOBS to Monster.com, an initiative being carried out under the President's Management Agenda. However, at the time of our review, we found a number of aspects of USAJOBS that could be improved. For example, USAJOBS' search feature is not particularly user-friendly. USAJOBS lacks a sufficiently simple and precise searching and indexing facility. Many of the search categories are broad, providing applicants with lists of jobs that

are not organized by relevance. In our view, the search feature of USAJOBS is a major shortcoming that needs to be addressed. If a prospective applicant can't find a relevant vacancy announcement, then no matter how poor or good that announcement may be, the prospective applicant is excluded from the applicant pool. Improvements in the quality of vacancy announcements must be coupled with systems enhancements to USAJOBS. When this happens, USAJOBS will be closer to becoming a truly premier recruiting tool, not merely an electronic bulletin board.

Agencies are not positioning themselves to make good selections

One function of vacancy announcements is to solicit information about applicants' qualifications. Announcements tell applicants what education or experience they must have to qualify for the job and what specific knowledge, skills, and abilities they will be rated on. Our review of required qualifications stated in vacancy announcements, including KSAs, suggests that agencies often lack a comprehensive assessment strategy needed to help them make good selections.

Agencies rely too heavily on previous work experience

The first hurdle Federal job applicants have to clear is OPM's qualification standards,³⁸ which agencies are required to apply to all applicants. The standards are experience-based, requiring agencies to focus on candidates' previous work rather than on their competence or talent, which have been found to be more predictive of success than has experience.³⁹ In most cases, the qualification standards allow the substitution of education for experience, but they do not acknowledge the obsolescence of experience or education over time. As a result of technological advances, what one knows can become obsolete in a matter of months, an especially serious problem in jobs where technology

³⁸ The qualification standards for General Schedule positions can be found at <http://www.opm.gov/qualifications>, and the qualification system for Trades and Labor occupations can be found at <http://www.opm.gov/qualifications/x-118c>.

³⁹ Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman, "First Break All the Rules," Simon & Schuster, New York, NY, 1999, pp. 71-105.

plays a vital role.⁴⁰ Although the OPM qualification standards may be appropriate for certain jobs where prior preparation is essential, they are problematic for entry-level jobs where high-potential applicants may lack the amount of experience or education required by the standards but still may have the competencies needed to do the job well.

Our review of vacancy announcements suggests that agencies do not use a wide range of assessment tools—such as tools that focus on competencies or potential—that would offset this heavy reliance on an applicant’s experience. Rather, agencies tend to use a limited number of assessment tools and they do not always apply these tools effectively in evaluating applicants’ qualifications.

Various types of assessment tools are available to evaluate candidates, including training and experience (T&E) rating methods, written tests, performance tests, structured interviews, work samples, physical abilities tests, assessment centers, and professional certifications. Even though certain assessment tools are more useful for certain types of jobs than for others, we found that agencies usually do not tailor the assessment methods they use to the type of job being filled. In a December 2001 study, we found that agencies use the T&E rating method as their assessment tool of choice.⁴¹ Our review of vacancy announcements also suggests this to be true.

However, T&E rating methods aren’t effective for certain jobs, such as blue-collar occupations. OPM’s *Job Qualification System for Trades and Labor Occupations* focuses on what applicants can do, rather than how they gained their skills or how long they spent in a line of work. This OPM guidance indicates that information about applicants for blue-collar jobs can be obtained from a number of sources, and questions to elicit information

should be easy to understand and answer, and presented in a “yes” or “no” format to the extent possible. Yet we find announcements for laborer-type jobs telling applicants to *substantiate by* [written] *examples* how they meet the knowledges, skills, and abilities required for the job. Or applicants for an electrician job are told to *submit a narrative statement...to* [address] *the knowledge, skills, and abilities* listed in the announcement. A review of the duties for these jobs shows that neither requires writing ability in the job at the level needed to apply for the job.

Furthermore, this excessive reliance on the T&E rating method may be misplaced. In the 2001 study cited above, we found that use of T&E rating tools typically is not very effective in identifying which candidate would be the best for the job. This method uses rating (or crediting) plans which assign points for certain kinds of work experiences or training related to the job being filled. Unfortunately, many of these plans are poorly developed, e.g., rating levels are ill-defined or unclear, which make them ineffective assessment tools.⁴²

Agencies’ heavy reliance on the assessment of previous work experience may stem from the importance selecting officials place on it in selection. It may also stem from managers’ lack of involvement in the substantive aspects of hiring, such as participating in job analyses, identifying assessment criteria, and developing assessment tools for the job being announced. However, this lack of involvement may also be due to HR specialists’ failure to reach out to managers to involve them more in the process, instead using previously developed tools to speed up the process. Using previously developed tools can be helpful to timely hiring, however, such tools can increase the risk of a bad hire if they are outdated or inappropriate for the job.

⁴⁰ John Sullivan, “Experience -- It ain’t what it used to be,” Gately Consulting, <http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/gately/pp15js56.htm>, Sept. 9, 1999.

⁴¹ U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, “Assessing Federal Job Seekers in a Delegated Examining Environment,” Washington, DC, December 2001, pp. 27-29.

⁴² Ibid.

Agencies use vague or restrictive qualification requirements

Agencies are required to conduct a job analysis to decide what knowledge, skills, and abilities a candidate needs to successfully perform a given job.⁴³ Well-developed KSAs can help agencies identify the right candidates, while poorly developed ones add little or no value to the process.

Many of the announcements we reviewed had appropriate KSAs. Unfortunately, many others listed KSAs that were too vague or restrictive to help agencies make good selections. Vague KSAs can discourage qualified applicants from applying, while overly restrictive KSAs can effectively disqualify high-quality applicants. Here are two examples of the latter type:

1. *Knowledge of complex procedures and rules concerning payment of government claims, i.e., travel, household goods, etc.;*
2. *Knowledge of a large body of military pay rules, regulations, laws, and procedures.* [Both from a financial services technician grade 6 announcement]

Because the two requirements are so restrictive, they make the competition no longer truly open. Although this announcement was open to any U.S. citizen, the only candidates who would have any chance of being referred to selecting officials for selection would be those with previous experience working with military pay and travel. Candidates from outside military organizations or outside the Federal Government would have little chance of getting this job even if they did have the aptitude or potential to do excellent work. Restrictive KSAs also create an appearance of a closed process that discourages qualified candidates from applying. Moreover, in many cases, a high-potential person can acquire knowledge in a fairly short time, while a person who already has knowledge of a particular subject but has limited ability will rarely be a good

selection. At a time when the Government has to attract a large number of quality applicants from outside its workforce, agencies need to be more thoughtful when developing job requirements.

Restrictive KSAs can occur for several reasons. The job may be poorly analyzed or the KSAs may be poorly worded. Restrictive KSAs may also occur when an agency's promotion policy requires the vacancy to be open to applicants outside the organization or outside the Government, even though a sufficient number of qualified applicants are available within the agency—including one the selecting official wants to select. When this happens, agencies may make the KSAs narrow enough to ensure that that employee meets the requirements and is referred for selection. In effect, the agency is conducting a sham competition, which, as we noted in our study of internal merit promotion, is an all too frequent occurrence when a supervisor has already observed an employee's performance and wishes to promote the employee but is not permitted to without issuing a vacancy announcement. The Board's recommendations on how to address this problem (including a call for more merit-based, noncompetitive promotions) appear in that report.⁴⁴

HR professionals lack expertise

Another concern raised by our review of vacancy announcements is that many HR professionals may not have the competencies to perform effectively, especially in the area of recruiting. The poor quality of many vacancy announcements is one indicator suggesting that expertise is lacking in Federal HR operations. Another is problems in the assessment methods that are being used.

This lack of expertise is not a new problem. In a 1993 MSPB report on personnel offices, we noted a lack of skill in many HR office staffs and called for increasing the skill levels of HR employees.⁴⁵ But it appears that agencies continue to give a rela-

⁴³ 5 C.F.R. 300.103.

⁴⁴ U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "The Federal Merit Promotion Program: Process vs. Outcome," Washington, DC, December 2001, pp. 9 and 28.

⁴⁵ U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "Federal Personnel Offices: Time for Change?," Washington, DC, August 1993, p. 28.

tively low priority to improving the quality of their human resources office staffs.

Since publication of our 1993 report, the number of Federal human resources professionals has decreased tremendously because of downsizing and retirements. The result has been a significant loss of knowledge and expertise. Subsequent Board studies confirm this. A 1998 survey of the Board's standing panel of HR specialists⁴⁶ showed that almost two-thirds of them agreed that many coworkers with critical expertise had left and that their expertise had not been replaced. Furthermore, about a quarter of our panel respondents indicated that they themselves do not possess all the knowledge and skills necessary to do their job, and almost half said they need more training to do their job well. Agencies need to address the issue of HR capacity to ensure that they have the competencies needed to provide effective and efficient support to program managers.

But training alone may not be enough to resolve the issue of HR staff competence. In addition to huge reductions in HR staffs, other changes, such as consolidation of HR functions into large regional offices, delegation of HR authority to managers, and automation have transformed the roles of the HR professionals. Almost 10 years ago,

in the report on personnel offices cited above, the Board outlined some of those roles. They included being part of the management team, helping managers plan strategies for developing a representative workforce, and focusing on mission, customer service, and strategic thinking.⁴⁷ Several years later, the National Academy of Public Administration created a competency model for HR professionals to support similar roles that the Academy had identified.⁴⁸ The roles were business partner, change agent, HR expert, leader, and advocate.

What does all this mean for HR specialists? It means that preparing a vacancy announcement oriented almost exclusively to agency and compliance requirements rather than job seekers, posting it on bulletin boards (electronic or otherwise), screening out unqualified applicants, and referring candidates for selection are not enough. This has always been true but especially is true now, when the Government faces ever-increasing competition for high-quality workers. HR professionals need to be proactive in seeking partnerships with other stakeholders, e.g., program managers and union officials, in order to ensure that agencies hire the people they need to deliver the services the American people need and want.

⁴⁶ In 1997, the Board established a standing panel of HR specialists whom we can periodically survey about personnel management issues. Although results from the panel surveys are not statistically representative of the population of HR specialists, their responses provide insights into what is happening in their organizations.

⁴⁷ U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "Federal Personnel Offices: Time for Change?," pp. 8-9.

⁴⁸ For more information, see the National Academy of Public Administration's "A Competency Model for Human Resources Professionals," Washington, DC, June 1996. OPM also looked at HR competencies as part of its three-part special study of the Federal HR workforce. For more information on HR competencies, see OPM's "Looking to the Future: Human Resources Competencies," September 1999, and "The HR Workforce: Meeting the Challenge of Change," January 2000.

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Conclusion and recommendations

Federal vacancy announcements are an important step in the Government's effort to recruit top talent. But the way many vacancy announcements are written does not further this effort. About half of the announcements we reviewed were acceptable, but left a great deal of room for improvement and did a generally poor job of selling the Government, the agency, or the positions. The other half were poor overall.

As a primary source of information for job seekers, and many times the only source, Federal vacancy announcements should be written to help applicants readily understand the job and the application process. Announcements need to market the job to appeal to appropriate groups of applicants. At the same time, the announcements must comply with legal and regulatory requirements regarding public notice of Federal vacancies and with public policies such as equal opportunity and veterans' hiring. To adequately accomplish all of these objectives, Federal vacancy announcements need to be improved considerably.

Currently, vacancy announcements are compliance-oriented to the detriment of recruiting. In the process of satisfying legal and regulatory requirements, many HR staffs tend to generate announcements that turn applicants away rather than encourage them to apply. Clearly, poor quality announcements do not help agencies meet the challenge of a human capital crisis if potential employees are deterred at the very beginning of the employment process.

There is no intrinsic reason why many of the problems that we observed regarding vacancy

announcements cannot be corrected. There are no insurmountable legal or regulatory barriers to interfere with creating better written, better organized, and more appealing vacancy announcements. However, even more challenging than fixing vacancy announcements is the challenge of improving the other aspects of the hiring process.

Many agencies lack a comprehensive recruiting strategy. Our review of vacancy announcements led us to conclude that many agencies approach recruiting somewhat haphazardly. Vacancy announcements do not take the place of recruiting, yet for many agencies, announcements alone seem expected to do all the selling. This might not be such a serious problem if the selling were at least done effectively. But announcements don't appear to be targeted towards identified pools of candidates, nor do they have a unified message or create an image of the Government as an employer of choice. Many do not clearly describe the duties of the vacant jobs. Often, vacancy announcements are canceled, leaving the impression that the recruiting agency doesn't know what it's doing. It also wastes HR office staff's time and applicants' time, which can discourage them from applying for other jobs in the future. On the whole, the announcements we reviewed provide little evidence that agencies have analyzed their jobs properly and developed recruiting plans that are based on those analyses.

Many agencies lack a comprehensive assessment strategy. Vacancy announcements are the vehicle by which agencies inform applicants about the qualifications required for the job and how candidates will be evaluated. The sample of vacancy

announcements we reviewed suggests that agencies use ratings of the candidates' training and experience as the preferred method of assessing their qualifications. Training and experience ratings typically require candidates to provide written narratives about the extent to which they have the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to do a job effectively. Depending on the job and the applicant pool this may not be the best way to evaluate candidates. Further, the knowledge, skills, and abilities that agencies require applicants to demonstrate often are specified in terms that are vague or restrictive, making them ineffective in identifying the best candidates for the job.

Ratings of training and experience can be an effective selection tool if applied appropriately. However, this is only one of a number of assessment tools that can be used to evaluate candidates and identify the best among them. Other tools include written tests, performance tests, structured interviews, work samples, physical abilities tests, assessment centers, and professional certifications. Unfortunately, agencies do not use these tools nearly as frequently as training and experience ratings, which appear to be used almost by default in many cases. This suggests that selecting officials tend to favor the use of training and experience ratings, or that they are unaware of the limitations inherent in their use. This bias in favor of training and experience ratings and the lack of awareness about these limitations may be shared by many HR specialists. The findings also suggest that program managers may not be as involved in the hiring process as they should be. This is particularly problematic because limited involvement on the part of program managers greatly increases the risk that they will hire the wrong person.

Many HR professionals appear to lack expertise. The well-written vacancy announcements and the strategic recruitment and assessment plans that are key components of a high-quality hiring program are the responsibility of an agency's HR professionals. Since 1993, we have noted the problems and challenges facing these professionals and recommended actions agencies should take to address the situation. This study simply corroborates and extends our earlier positions. We believe HR pro-

professionals need a higher level of analytical, critical, and strategic thinking skills. They also need to use more effectively the skills they do possess in order to develop and implement the necessary strategies for successful hiring programs in collaboration with all stakeholders. This includes being more proficient in writing plain English announcements in a way that is not only informative, but also welcoming and sensitive to marketing and public relations techniques.

Heavy HR workloads and the steady loss of staff over the last decade are responsible for some of the deficiencies we observed. The training provided HR specialists and the manner in which they themselves are selected also play roles in this situation. Perhaps more important, however, is the need to elevate HR's position enough to achieve the HR workforce we envision. We're hopeful that the appointment of a chief human capital officer, as called for in the recently enacted Homeland Security legislation, will help HR to attain the seat at the table necessary to address the human capital crisis.

As the Government undergoes dramatic change to respond to the threat of terrorism while still meeting its myriad other responsibilities, it should be able to depend on HR professionals to play a critical role in ushering in that change. The challenges to HR professionals are immense, but by no means insurmountable, provided agencies place greater emphasis on the HR function. Agencies have limited resources and it makes good business sense to ensure that the HR tools used—such as vacancy announcements—are as good as they can be in order to increase the likelihood that the Government has the workforce it needs to serve the American people.

With these challenges in mind, we offer the following recommendations:

In collaboration with appropriate stakeholders, chief human capital officers and HR directors should:

- **Develop and implement a comprehensive recruiting strategy, with improved vacancy announcements as a major component. In**

developing such a recruiting strategy, agencies should:

- Identify the groups from which they need to recruit, then write vacancy announcements targeted to those groups.
- Greatly reduce the length of vacancy announcements by providing only relevant information and avoiding repetitive statements and unnecessary verbiage.
- Reduce the use of negative, threatening, and legalistic language.
- Design a message to sell the job and the agency, and to the extent possible, present the Federal Government as an employer of choice.
- Describe the job and its requirements clearly and realistically.
- Make the application process simple, breaking the hiring process into steps whenever feasible. Require the least amount of information needed to make basic qualification determinations, then request more information as needed later in the process.
- Give clear and straightforward instructions on how to apply. Also, give applicants options on how to submit their applications. Do not limit filing methods to electronic media.
- Move towards automation to support recruiting and subsequent assessment efforts.
- **Develop a comprehensive assessment strategy.** An essential first step in filling any vacancy should be to conduct a thorough job analysis and then to choose assessment tools that are appropriate for the job and the candidate pool. When feasible and with the aid of technology, agencies should minimize the burden on applicants by conducting applicant assessment in stages.
- **Examine the quality of their HR staffs.** Agencies should assess the competencies of current HR staff and develop a strategy to ensure they have the competencies and resources needed to carry out their responsibilities. The strategy should include establishing procedures for selecting and developing HR professionals to ensure

that they have competencies needed for high performance in the roles demanded of them. Organizations and individuals have developed a number of competency models that agencies can use. For example, the HR roles that OPM has identified are technical HR expert, strategic business partner, change agent, and leader.

The director of OPM should:

- **Revise the Federal regulation pertaining to vacancy announcements.** The regulation at 5 C.F.R. § 330.707 lists the information required in vacancy announcements. The list is fairly modest and includes information essential to job applicants. However, the regulation requires the inclusion of explanations regarding eligibility requirements for veterans preference and career transition program consideration. This material can be lengthy and sometimes complex and confusing, and certainly does not apply to the majority of potential job candidates. Therefore, the regulation should be revised to make inclusion of such lengthy material optional as long as the announcement provides a hyperlink that makes the details available to interested applicants. This should allow agencies to make vacancy announcements shorter and tailor them more easily to targeted groups.
- **Make USAJOBS, the Government’s career opportunity site, more attractive, welcoming, and easy to use.** To be more effective, USAJOBS should be developed and maintained with applicants in mind, many of whom may not be technologically savvy or familiar with Federal hiring procedures. In particular, OPM should:
 - Make navigation easier by making information more transparent and meaningful.
 - Create a simple and more precise job search capability that can provide a list of jobs organized in order of relevance to the job seeker.
- **Continue providing agencies with information on writing better vacancy announcements, building on its recent efforts to modernize and improve Federal vacancy announcements.**

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Appendix A. Rating criteria

We used five criteria to rate the 100 vacancy announcements we randomly selected from USA-JOBS on March 6 and 7, 2002. In developing benchmarks for organization and readability, we relied on various books and articles on reader-centered writing, but especially on the work of the Federal Communicators' Network, the Plain English Network, and Mortimer D. Goldstein, author of "Disciplined Writing and Career Development." We developed the standards for judging announcements' usefulness and effectiveness as a recruiting tool on the basis of our literature review on recruiting. To judge utility and appropriateness, we relied on our knowledge of the rules and regulations that govern the Federal staffing process. A bibliography of the works we reviewed appears in appendix C. The five criteria are as follows:

Organization. This pertains to the flow of information and whether the sections of the announcement are arranged in a logical sequence. Organization includes the overall structure as well as the order in which information is presented, with presentation of the most important information first being the aim. It also includes layout, delineating the sections and providing headings to make them easily distinguishable.

Readability. Readability includes the tone and the manner in which the information is presented. Is the presentation friendly and inviting? Are instruc-

tions or requests for information made politely and pleasantly, or in a threatening or intimidating manner?

Readability also includes the way language is used—the choice of vocabulary plus grammar, including punctuation and spelling. This includes the use of acronyms or jargon. For best readability, the use of acronyms and jargon should be limited, and if used, should include definitions for applicants who may be unfamiliar with the terms. Readability also includes clarity (i.e., use of plain English and concise sentences) and pertinence of the information to the section in which it appears.

Usefulness as a recruiting tool. This pertains to the efforts made to attract applicants by presenting the agency and the job positively and realistically. This includes information that may make the job appealing to applicants, e.g., the mission of the agency or the types of benefits programs offered to employees.

Utility for applicants. Utility is defined as the extent to which the information or instructions allow applicants to easily, accurately, and completely do what is asked of them in order to apply.

Appropriateness. Appropriateness refers to whether the information and documentation requested or required from the applicants add value to the hiring process.

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Appendix B. A sample vacancy announcement

Any Department⁴⁹ Job Vacancy Announcement

Vacancy Announcement Number	XYZ2002
Position	Cultural Resources Manager, GS-025-15; permanent full-time; \$92,060 - \$119,682 annual salary and a full-range of benefits. Relocation allowance and recruitment bonus are negotiable.
Duty Location	Any Park , Anystate. The park is located in a picturesque location 5 miles from Pictureperfect City with excellent hospitals, churches, schools, and residential areas.
Open Period	Feb. 25 to Mar. 8, 2002; applications must be received or postmarked by March 8 th .
Who May Apply	Any qualified U.S. citizen; no previous Federal service is required.
Duties	As a guardian and protector of one of America's cultural resources, you will manage and administer the overall operation of Any Park. As manager, you will plan, develop, organize, direct, staff, and evaluate park programs that Americans would enjoy. You may have to travel overnight up to 10 times per month.
Qualifications Required	Your work experience must include at least 1 year of experience planning, directing, and managing operations, budget, and administration for a variety of very complex recreational, natural, and cultural resource management programs, including supervising the work of professional, technical, and support staff.
Basis for Rating	<p>If you meet the qualification requirements stated above, you will be further rated based on your responses to the Occupational Questionnaire. The questions used to rate applications are based on the following evaluation criteria: technical competence, negotiating, leadership, and team building. You will find the definitions of these criteria in the questionnaire.</p> <p>Your score may range from 70-100 points and will be based on your responses to the questionnaire and information stated in your application. Please make sure that your responses to the questionnaire are supported in your application. Please follow all instructions carefully as errors and omissions may affect your score. Your score is critical for your getting referred for the job.</p>

⁴⁹ Adapted from a vacancy announcement prepared by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management for the National Park Service. All names, phone numbers, addresses, and links are fictitious. Underlined words represent hyperlinks.

<p>How to Apply</p>	<p>Please follow these steps to apply:</p> <p>Step 1: Submit an application</p> <p>Submit a resume, Optional Application for Federal Employment (OF-612), or other written application format of your choice. You may obtain a copy of the OF-612 online or by calling 1-XXX-XXX-XXXX. If you are submitting a resume or other application format, please include certain specific information (see list here). You may also build and submit your resume online by using our Resume Builder.</p> <p>Step 2: Submit a completed Occupational Questionnaire</p> <p>The Occupational Questionnaire is our rating instrument. You may submit your questionnaire online, or do one of the following.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submit your answers via telephone. Call 1-XXX-XXX-XXXX (long distance charges apply). Follow the instructions that will be given to you. To record your responses to the questions, please use the numbers on your telephone keypad by selecting 1 for A, 2 for B, 3 for C, 4 for D, 5 for E, etc. You may review and correct your responses after you've finished entering your responses. It may take you up to 30 minutes to complete it. • Submit your answers using an answer sheet (OPM Form 1203-FX). You may obtain the answer sheet and a copy of the questionnaire by visiting any Office of Personnel Management office, by calling 1-XXX-XXX-XXXX, or by sending an e-mail to helpdesk@anyagency.gov. <p>Step 3: Claim Veterans Preference</p> <p>If you're a veteran, you may be eligible for hiring preference. To learn more about Veterans Preference and whether you're eligible for it, please visit our website or call 1-XXX-XXX-XXXX. To claim veterans preference, please submit your DD 214 (Certificate of Release or Discharge from Active Duty) or SF 15 (Application for 10-Point Veterans Preference). Write the vacancy announcement number on top of the form.</p> <p>Step 4: Submit your paper materials:</p> <p>Mail your application, Occupational Questionnaire answer sheet, and (if applicable) proof of veterans preference eligibility to:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">U.S. Office of Personnel Management ATTN: Vacancy Anno. No. XYZ2002 P. O. Box 0000 Any City, AnyState 00000</p>
<p>Contact Information</p>	<p>If you have questions about this announcement or your application, contact Ms. H.R. Specialist at 1-XXX-XXX-XXXX, by sending a message to hrrspecialist@anyagency.gov, or by writing to the address above. Please reference vacancy announcement number XYZ2002 when you write or call.</p>
<p>Information for Current or Former Federal Employees</p>	<p>Current or former Federal employees eligible for the Career Transition Assistance Program (CTAP) or Interagency Career Transition Assistance Program (ICTAP) must receive a score of at least 80 (without veterans preference points) to received priority consideration under either program. Please indicate in your application that you're applying as a CTAP or ICTAP eligible. For more information about these programs, click here.</p>
<p>The Federal Government is an equal opportunity employer. Please call our Disabilities Program Manager at 1-XXX-XXX-XXXX if you need reasonable accommodations to apply due to disabilities. Decisions on granting reasonable accommodation will be made on a case-by-case basis.</p>	

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