



The Importance of Career Planning in the Federal Job Search: A Practice Application Digest

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Introduction

The federal government has become an employer of choice in recent years (Friel, 2008). Given the economic downturn, the election of a new president, and a call to public service following the events of 9/11, a federal job has been painted with the brush of opportunity and purpose (Horne, Foss, & Leslie, 2009). In such times, the prevailing advice often provided to hopeful federal job seekers is to take any federal job that is presented to them, as a way to "get their foot in the door." However, this advice is dated and misleading. Given the arduous hiring process, federal managers are reluctant to allow employees to move from their current positions. In fact, the law states that job transfer is required only in the case of promotion (Administrative Personnel, 1968). Therefore, lateral transfers (i.e., job mobility at the same grade and salary) are often difficult to obtain. Employees who have taken a less than satisfying position to get their foot in the door can find themselves dissatisfied; their managers may find themselves contending with employees who are not well matched to their jobs.

There is a better solution to filling the many federal jobs that have been created as a result of a major human capital crisis created by retirements, the stimulus package, and increased federal budget. The best advice to potential federal candidates is the same as for job seekers in any industry: identify your career goals and develop a job search strategy in alignment with your goals (Feller, Honaker, & Zagbeski, 2001). In this way, job seekers can honor their unique strengths and abilities and thus avoid the pitfall of landing a job that is not a good career fit.

A federal career can span decades. It should encompass more than just a paycheck and good health benefits. With career planning, proper guidance, and research, federal job seekers are poised to seek and secure work in occupations and with agencies that match their qualifications, skills, and interests (Bimrose, n.d.) Everyone benefits: federal employees, the agencies that employ them, and the taxpayers who support them.

Facts/Findings

1. The economic downturn has made the federal government the employer of choice for many job seekers.

From articles in the *Government Executive Magazine* to studies by the Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB), we hear that the federal government has become the employer of choice. In his article named "Employer of Choice," Brian Friel of govexec.com, shares the following: "Attracted by

meaningful missions, generous benefits and job security, a diverse group of recent college grads and experienced workers are banging on Uncle Sam's door for employment" (2009). This comment was based on information obtained in a study by the federal MSPB that provides oversight for federal hiring and promotions. MSPB (2008) found that one in four new hires was willing to wait six months or more to accept federal employment, and that most new hires planned to make a full career of their federal position.

2. Finding a job in the federal government takes more time, effort, and planning than finding a corporate position.

The federal application package consists of a three to five page resume, an average of three to five application essays, and supporting documents. Federal resumes include both quantified skills and accomplishments. Federal application essays are approximately one page in length (double spaced), and they are written based on a model suggested by the Office of Personnel Management (2006, October). Effective "storytelling" and writing proficiency are essential for conveying knowledge, skills, and abilities. Without the resume and other required information, federal Human Resources personnel cannot verify applicants' qualifications.

3. There are few, if any, shortcuts to the federal hiring process.

Federal job postings (called Vacancy Announcements) contain detailed information regarding the qualifications, credentials, and method for applying for each position. The process can require up to 15 hours to analyze an announcement and to create targeted application materials. Applicants must completely read and interpret a Vacancy Announcement to determine if they are eligible and qualified to apply. Because the federal government has become the employer of choice, some corporate career advisors/resume writers/job search trainers supply corporate-related advice to federal job seekers. However, federal hiring is very different from corporate hiring, and federal job seekers will not be competitive if provided corporate job search strategies.

4. New hires who think they can "get their foot in the door" of a federal agency and then move to the federal job they want are not being realistic.

Federal law states that job transfer is required only in the case of promotion (5 CFR, 1968). Therefore, lateral transfers (i.e., job mobility at the same grade and salary) are often difficult to obtain. Job seekers can receive increased satisfaction from their federal careers by knowing what type of position suits their unique talents and interests, and targeting this position from the outset. By pursuing a job that is in alignment with their talents and skills, their career is more likely to be one of growth and progression, thus benefiting them as well as their agencies. There are numerous opportunities for applicants with a variety of backgrounds and experience. Matching career and occupational choices with interests, needs, and abilities can lead federal job seekers to find the right position in the right agency, based upon informed choice and evaluation of options.

5. The use of career management techniques is an effective way to begin one's federal career.

The variety of positions, agencies, and departments that make up the federal government increase the likelihood that job seekers can find their right livelihood with Uncle Sam. Persons are assumed to be most satisfied, successful, and stable in a work environment that is congruent with their personality type (Miller, 2005). A career can span decades. It should encompass more than a paycheck and good health benefits. The life-span developmental perspective on careers emphasizes continuity, the progressive dynamic process of maturation and adaptation (Jepsen & Dickson, 2003). With career planning, proper guidance, and research, federal job seekers are poised to seek and secure work in occupations and with agencies that match their qualifications, skills, and interests.

Recommendations

The increase in federal opportunities combined with the demand for federal jobs as well as decreased mobility once hired can provide motivation for job seekers to clarify their goals and target their search to positions that are in alignment with their skills, interests, and abilities. Career counselors and other career professionals can capitalize on this opportunity to introduce career planning to federal job seekers.

Summary and Conclusion

Career counselors are valuable in helping job seekers with career decision-making. Career planning can simplify the job search process as well as bring meaning into workers' careers. Job seekers are often advised by those without knowledge of career decision-making. It is especially critical for those who consider entering the federal workforce to gain an understanding of themselves and their options by

investigating their interests, abilities, and what they want from a career. Often the advice given to federal job seekers is focused solely on job stability and consistent income and benefits, with little consideration for the toll that results from the pursuit of unsatisfying work on a daily basis over many years. However, the variety of positions, agencies, and departments that make up the federal government create the likelihood that job seekers can find their right livelihood with Uncle Sam. Matching career and occupational choices with interests, needs, and abilities, can lead federal job seekers to find the right position in the right agency, based upon informed choice and evaluation of options. This investment in their future can pay dividends for them and their agencies.

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Suggested APA style reference:

Taylor, K. & Ruck, J. M. (2010). *The importance of career planning in the federal job search: A practice application digest* (ACAPCD-32). Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.