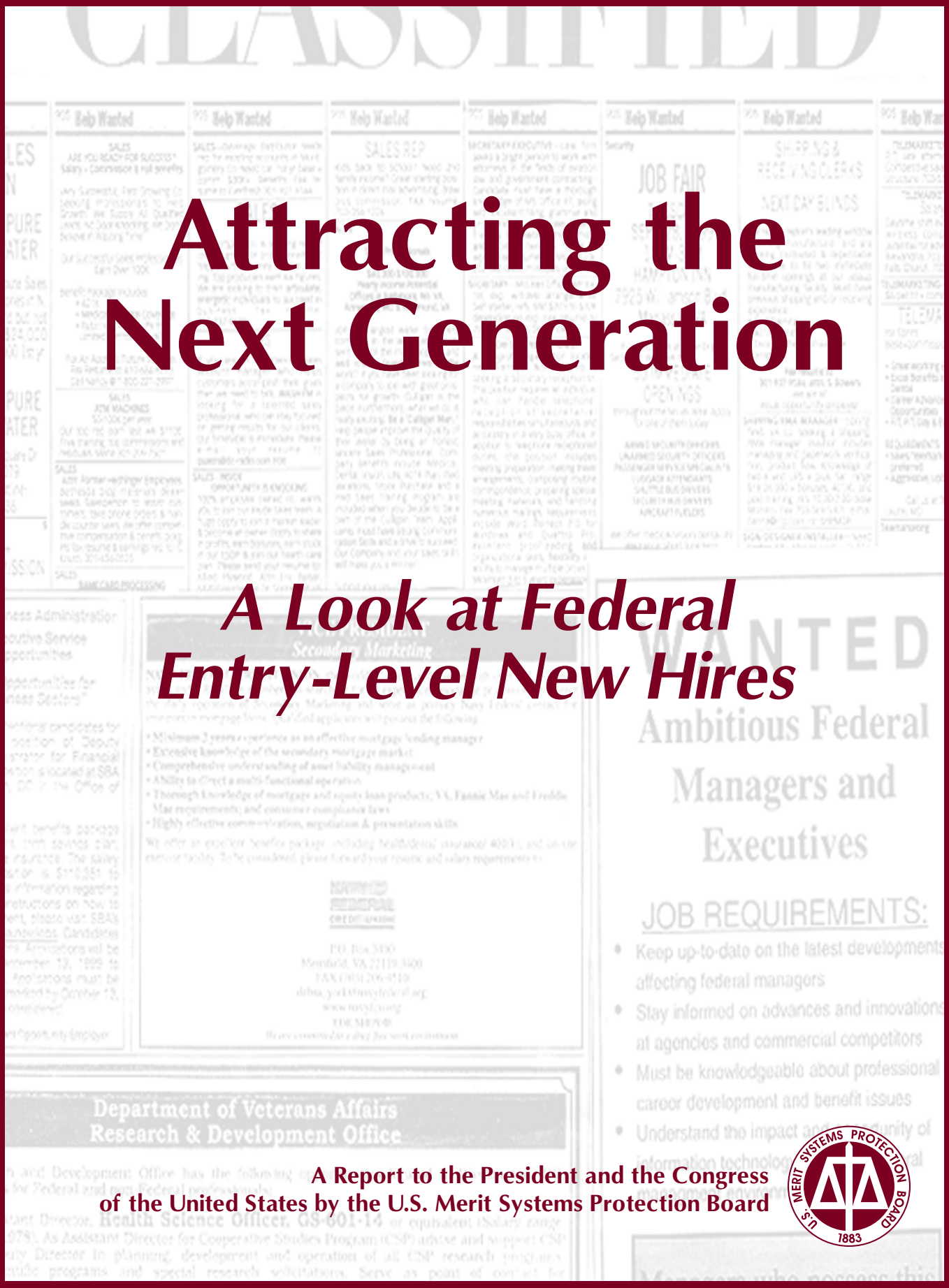


Attracting the Next Generation

A Look at Federal Entry-Level New Hires

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

THE CHAIRMAN

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

January 2008

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 Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) report, *Attracting the Next Generation: A Look at Federal Entry-Level New Hires*. The purpose of this report is to identify how the Government can improve its ability to recruit and hire entry-level professional and administrative employees.

To prepare for a potential retirement wave, Federal agencies will likely increase their entry-level hiring to rebuild the pipeline from entry-level positions through the journey-level and beyond. Given this context, it is important to assess how well the Federal hiring process is working, particularly in terms of the Government's ability to recruit entry-level new hires from all segments of society and select employees on the basis of merit after fair and open competition.

Our research points to a number of positive conclusions about the Federal Government's ability to attract the best and the brightest. New hires were highly motivated to obtain jobs specifically with the Federal Government, and many plan to spend a significant portion of their career with the Government. They had favorable impressions of the Federal Government when they applied for their first Government jobs, and a large percentage ran into few or no obstacles during the hiring process.

However, there are some troublesome trends that could thwart merit-based hiring over time. For instance, agencies are increasingly using excepted service appointment authorities to hire new employees. These authorities should be used with caution because they can inadvertently circumvent recruitment from all segments of society, fair and open competition and selection based on relative ability.

The recommendations in this report focus on how to improve entry-level hiring efforts while also protecting merit. I believe you will find this report useful as you consider issues affecting the Federal Government's ability to recruit a highly qualified, diverse workforce.

Respectfully,

Neil A. G. McPhie

Attracting the Next Generation:

A Look at Federal Entry-Level New Hires



A REPORT TO THE PRESIDENT AND
THE CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES
BY THE U.S. MERIT SYSTEMS PROTECTION BOARD

U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board

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

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

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

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

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

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Executive Summary

The Federal Government hires a significant number of entry-level new hires in professional and administrative occupations every year. Because of the large number of impending retirements and the concurrent necessity to build career pipelines for these positions, the Federal Government is likely to increase its entry-level hiring at least through fiscal year 2010. Critics argue that the Government may not be up to this task. They say the Government has become less attractive to younger workers and that the length and complexity of the hiring process hampers applicant interest in Federal jobs. The overall results of this study show that while some of the criticisms hold true, the Government is actually better at attracting new hires than some might think.

Background

There is concern that the Federal Government is facing a "brain drain" as the result of an aging workforce and high retirement eligibility rates for Federal employees. Recruiting a qualified stream of new hires is already a tough proposition for many occupations, locations and salary levels. It will become even more difficult as the Government competes with other sectors for qualified candidates as large numbers of the labor force retire.

To properly prepare for this workforce "crisis," agencies should practice a balanced approach to workforce planning that includes ensuring a sufficient pipeline from the entry-level through the journey-level in at least mission-critical positions. Entry-level employees are the fundamental building blocks of that pipeline. This crisis comes at a time when several studies indicate that the Federal Government has become less attractive as an employer, particularly to the younger, less experienced segment of the labor force that generally fills entry-level positions.

To help agencies assess and improve their recruitment efforts, the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) conducted a study of Federal entry-level new hires in professional and administrative occupations. The purpose of the study was to:

(1) Explore who Federal entry-level new hires are, why they came to work for the Government and what challenges they faced in applying for Federal jobs;

(2) Determine any structural barriers to recruiting and selecting applicants from all segments of society, based on relative ability after fair and open competition;

(3) Examine differences between new hires under 30 years of age and new hires 30 and over to determine whether generational differences affect career decisions or motivations and the implications this has for recruitment; and

(4) Identify how the Government can improve its recruitment and hiring of entry-level employees.

Findings

Our findings regarding the demographics and attitudes of Federal entry-level new hires have many implications for Federal recruitment and selection practices.

Setting the Context. The traditional competitive examining process is no longer the dominant process for hiring entry-level employees. A growing number of new hires are being brought into the civil service through excepted service authorities, such as the Federal Career Intern Program. While these authorities provide agencies a number of advantages, they also make it easier to unnecessarily narrow the applicant pool, potentially short-circuiting fair and open competition.

Who Entry-Level New Hires Are. Federal entry-level new hires in professional and administrative positions are not the young, inexperienced, recent college graduates many expect. On average, they are 33 years old and have at least 1 to 5 years of prior full-time work experience. This is partly explained by recruitment and assessment practices agencies use that often favor older applicants who have more experience over younger applicants who may have more potential. Good recruitment and assessment practices will identify the best candidate for the job based on relative ability, regardless of age and years of experience.

What They Want. There was not a substantial difference between generations in terms of the employment features they seek, and most thought that the Government could provide these features. New hires of all ages had a strong desire for job security and traditional benefits such as health insurance, retirement and annual and sick leave. In addition, they were fairly interested in alternative benefits such as flexible work schedules and telecommuting. Contrary to popular belief, a significant portion of new hires, even those under 30, already plan to stay with the Government until they retire (45 percent of new hires under 30 and 36 percent of new hires who came to the Government directly from school).

What They Did to Get the Job. New hires faced fewer obstacles in the hiring process than we had expected and were fairly determined to obtain a Federal job. Though lack of timeliness was the most cited obstacle, a large segment of new hires were hired relatively quickly (38 percent in 2 months or less) and cited facing no obstacles in searching for a Federal job (17 percent). They seemed to have a fair amount of awareness about the Government at the time they applied and tended to send few applications to other employment sectors; some were willing to wait a long time for a job offer (23 percent waited more than 6 months).

Recommendations

This study demonstrates that the Federal Government can more ably compete for entry-level new hires than some might expect. Nonetheless, there are improvements agencies can make to their recruitment, marketing and assessment practices to reach an even wider pool of qualified applicants and address problems revealed by our data. Therefore, MSPB makes the following recommendations to help agencies strengthen their hiring efforts.

Agencies should:

Use more predictive applicant assessment tools. High-quality selections depend on good employee assessment tools. This study, along with other MSPB research, indicates that agencies tend to use tools that are less predictive of future job performance, such as measures of training and experience. Agencies should develop and administer assessments that identify candidates who have the skills and abilities necessary for the job and that have a greater ability to predict future performance.

Use a balanced set of recruitment strategies that promote fair and open competition. Agencies tend to rely on passive recruitment strategies, such as Internet postings, or recruitment strategies that target a narrow pool of applicants, such as college job fairs. Agencies should use a variety of recruitment sources to reach qualified applicants from all segments of society.

Market what is important. The results of this study indicate that the Government has much to offer applicants that applicants want, including job security, good benefits, the ability to make a difference with the work and workplace flexibilities. Agencies should evaluate how and where they can maximize the use of these benefits and flexibilities and then market these job attractors to entice high-quality applicants to apply.

Evaluate the agency hiring process to ensure there are no unnecessary obstacles. Agencies' internal hiring practices often create additional, unnecessary barriers that can add to the time it takes to make a job offer. Lack of timeliness was one of the obstacles to entry-level hiring cited most by new employees. Agencies should evaluate their hiring process, determine where improvements can be made and implement the needed changes to be successful in the competition for new, highly qualified workers.

Avoid stereotyping applicants based on generational assumptions. This study indicates that there are similarities in what the different generations want in a job. However, generational stereotypes can lead human resources (HR) staff and selecting officials to treat employees differently based on generational category. Instead, those involved in the hiring process should treat applicants and employees as individuals with different needs, not simply as members of a "generation."

The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) should:

Work with agencies to develop a Governmentwide framework for Federal hiring reform that simplifies hiring procedures by streamlining and consolidating appointing authorities while protecting merit-based hiring. Many agencies are opting out of the traditional competitive examining system, suggesting fundamental problems with the competitive process. OPM should work with agencies to identify how to systematically address flaws in the competitive process rather than rely on short-term stop gaps that may have their own problems with respect to their producing narrower applicant pools.

Work with agencies to develop better assessment tools. OPM delegated agencies the responsibility to assess applicants, but agencies often do not have supporting resources to carry out this responsibility. OPM should present Congress with the business case to receive appropriated funds to centrally develop and validate assessment tools that agencies could acquire at little or no cost.

Implementing these recommendations should help agencies ensure that they are hiring qualified applicants from all segments of society after fair and open competition and that they are treating applicants fairly and equitably, as prescribed by the merit system principles.

Introduction

Purpose

Who exactly are Federal agencies hiring to fill entry-level positions? Why do these new hires come to work for the Federal Government? What were they looking for in a job when the agency recruited them? Why should we care—so long as agencies find *someone* to do the work?

Anyone who has read a newspaper lately can probably understand that recruiting and hiring new Federal employees is going to get even tougher than it is now.[1] The problem goes by many names—the human capital crisis, retirement tsunami, brain drain—but its essence is the same. The Office of Personnel Management is projecting that about 230,000 Federal employees will retire between fiscal years (FY) 2007 and 2010.[2] Recruiting a qualified stream of new hires is already a tough proposition for some occupations, locations and salary levels. Are agencies prepared to replace those who are leaving?

All of the people retiring over the next few years will not be replaceable by entry-level new hires. However, agencies need to practice a balanced approach to workforce planning to deal with the expected workforce crisis. They should have a sufficient pipeline from the entry-level through the journey-level and beyond in at least their mission-critical positions. Entry-level employees are the fundamental building blocks of that pipeline. Therefore, hiring a steady stream of entry-level new hires becomes an important piece of the workforce management puzzle. In particular, hiring "the right" entry-level employees—those who can change and grow with the agency and its mission—is especially important. Data presented later in this report indicate that once entry-level employees are hired by the Government, they often stay for their career. Having a well planned strategy for hiring entry-level employees will help agencies avert the impending crisis and avoid creating new staffing problems in the future.

This looming crisis comes at a time when several research studies have shown that the Federal service has become less attractive as an employer, particularly to the

[1] For a discussion of the current issues facing the Federal Government in terms of recruiting and hiring, see U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *Reforming Federal Hiring: Beyond Faster and Cheaper*, Washington, DC, July 2006.

[2] U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *Retirement Projections*, 2004, p. 50, downloaded from www.opm.gov/feddata/retire/rs2004_projections.pdf.

younger workforce—the ones generally thought to fill entry-level positions.[3] At the same time, competition for high-quality talent among American employment sectors is heating up. Some studies have shown that new entrants to the Nation's overall workforce are not well prepared to take on the growing number of knowledge-based jobs, particularly those that require highly technical skills such as jobs in science and engineering.[4] Therefore as the demand for these skills continues to increase (which it is predicted to do) and the supply of candidates with these skills continues to decrease (as it is expected to do unless some drastic action occurs), competition for these candidates will be fierce.

Therefore, to help agencies' efforts to effectively recruit for entry-level positions, the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board conducted a study of Federal entry-level new hires. The purpose of the study was to:

(1) Explore who Federal entry-level new hires are, why they came to work for the Government and what challenges they faced in applying for Federal jobs;

(2) Determine any structural barriers to recruiting and selecting applicants from all segments of society, based on relative ability after fair and open competition;

(3) Examine differences between new hires under 30 years of age and new hires 30 and over to determine whether generational differences affect career decisions or motivations and the implications this has for recruitment; and

(4) Identify how the Government can improve its recruitment and hiring of entry-level employees.

MSPB conducted this study in accordance with our mandate to study Federal merit systems and determine if the workforce is managed in adherence with the merit system principles and is free of prohibited personnel practices. The research is intended to support merit system values, enhance human resources management practices and ensure the public interest in a merit-based civil service.

Specifically, recruitment and assessment practices are a critical element in supporting the Federal merit system. They ensure that the Government attracts qualified applicants from all segments of society and hires them on the basis of relative ability after fair and open competition. In addition, they ensure that applicants are treated fairly and equitably regardless of factors such as political affiliation, race, color,

[3] For instance, see (1) Carol Chetkovich, *Winning the Best and the Brightest: Increasing the Attraction of Public Service*, A Price Waterhouse Coopers Endowment for the Business of Government, Cambridge, Mass., July 2001; (2) Linda Bilmes and W. Scott Gould, "Getting the Federal Workers We Need," *Washington Post* (from the forthcoming book *The People Factor*), Aug. 25, 2005; (3) Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc., on behalf of The Leon & Sylvia Panetta Institute For Public Policy, *Report Findings Based on a Survey Among American College Students*, Washington, DC, June 13, 2006.

[4] For instance, see (1) Thomas L. Friedman, "The Quiet Crisis," *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2006, pp. 323-359 and (2) The Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and the Society for Human Resources Management, *Are They Really Ready to Work? Employers' Perspectives on the Basic Knowledge and Applied Skills of New Entrants to the 21st Century Workforce*, October 2006.

religion, national origin, sex, marital status, age, or handicapping condition, and with proper regard for their privacy and constitutional rights.[5]

Scope and Methodology

This study covers new Federal entry-level (General Schedule and Related Grades 5, 7 and 9) employees who were appointed into full-time, nonseasonal, permanent positions in executive branch professional and administrative occupations.

We chose to look at professional and administrative occupations because they make up the largest portion of the Federal workforce.[6] In fact, as a percentage of the total workforce, these occupations grew significantly between FY 1990 and FY 2006, rising from 47 percent to 60 percent. This growth has occurred as the number of employees in other occupational categories, particularly blue-collar and clerical occupations, has declined. Further, we looked at professional and administrative occupations because when filled at the entry-level, they generally have a career track that progresses several levels beyond the grade into which the employee was hired. They therefore require a larger agency investment in development and preparation than positions with little or no established career progression.

Researchers often define entry-level employees as those hired at General Schedule and Related Grades-5 and 7. This two-grade definition made sense at a time when the Government's work was generally standardized and the needed skills were fairly basic. However, because the nature of Federal work has become more knowledge-based and the skills it requires have become more specialized, anecdotal evidence suggests that agencies need to recruit at a higher level of proficiency for entry-level positions than they once did. Therefore, we chose to include GS-9 new hires in the study.[7]

This study relied primarily on the following sources of information:

- **OPM's Central Personnel Data File (CPDF).** The CPDF is a computerized database maintained by OPM and contains a record of personnel actions on Federal civilian employees, such as entrance on duty, promotions, transfers and separations.[8] Using the CPDF, we are able to identify human capital trends in how agencies recruit, hire and manage their workforces.

[5] Merit System Principles No. 1 and 2 (5 U.S.C. § 2301).

[6] OPM's *Guide to Personnel Data Standards* defines professional occupations as white collar occupations that require knowledge in a field of science or learning and administrative occupations as white collar occupations that involve the exercise of analytical ability, judgment, discretion, and personal responsibility, as well as the application of a body of knowledge related to one or more fields of administration or management. OPM's *Qualifications Standards for General Schedule Positions* provides a list of the occupational series covered by each category.

[7] From here, we refer to the General Schedule and Related Grades 5, 7 and 9 simply as GS-5, 7 and 9.

[8] Some agencies, such as the U.S. Postal Service and intelligence agencies, are exempt from OPM's personnel reporting requirements and are not included in the dataset.

- **Entry-level new hire survey.** MSPB surveyed 1,863 randomly selected entry-level employees hired in FY 2005. "New hire" is defined as an employee who had no previous civilian Federal service personnel actions recorded in the CPDF. We used a stratified sample that allows a comparison of the responses from survey participants under 30 years old to those from participants 30 and over. A total of 1,115 survey participants returned the survey, for a response rate of 60 percent. We conducted the survey from February through May 2006.

- **Literature review.** We conducted an extensive review of literature related to hiring entry-level employees. The literature covered topics including generational research, job choice decisions and risk taking, research describing what undergraduate and graduate students want in a job, college and university enrollment trends, issues related to the human capital crisis, and general hiring issues.

Setting the Context: Past, Present and Future New Hire Trends

This report strives to help agencies improve their ability to attract and select professional and administrative entry-level new hires. A look at past, present and future hiring trends, particularly at the entry-level, can tell us if there are issues that might impact agencies' ability to recruit from all segments of society and make selections based on relative ability after fair and open competition, as set forth by the merit system principles. Ultimately, this chapter is about providing the context in which to consider entry-level hiring.

The Aging Federal Workforce

The Federal workforce is aging. As of September 2006, over 40 percent of permanent, full-time Federal employees were 50 years of age or older.[9] In 2006, OPM estimated that approximately 60 percent of the Federal Government's white-collar employees will be eligible for retirement over the next 10 years.[10] In terms of how many employees are actually expected to retire, OPM projected that 57,000 to 59,000 would retire each fiscal year between 2006 and 2010.[11] During that period, OPM estimated that some of the Government's most populous professional and administrative occupations would have an average retirement rate of 13 to 18 percent:[12]

Occupation	Retirement Projection
All	18.5%
Law Enforcement	13.4%
Scientist/Engineer	14.6%
Information Technology	16.9%
Acquisition	17.6%
Financial Management	17.9%

[9] U.S. Office of Personnel Management, Fedscope (www.fedscope.opm.gov). Age distribution of permanent full-time employees as of September 2006.

[10] Statement of Nancy H. Kichak, Associate Director, U.S. Office of Personnel Management before the Subcommittee on the Federal Workforce and Agency Organization, Committee on Government Reform, United States House of Representatives, July 25, 2006.

[11] OPM, *Retirement Projections*, p. 3.

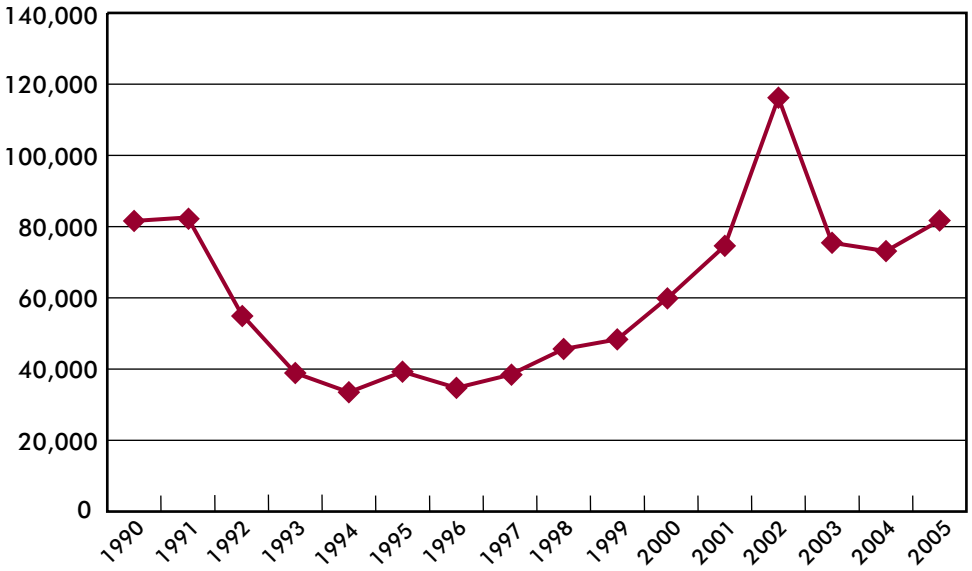
[12] OPM, *Retirement Projections*, p. 4.

These retirements come at a time when the media and many researchers predict that the Government will have a difficult time competing with other sectors for high-quality applicants. They claim that the Federal hiring process takes too long, the process is overly bureaucratic, potential applicants do not think the Government can offer interesting and compelling work, Federal salaries are not competitive and entry-level new hires think they can make a bigger difference in the nonprofit or private sectors. These issues will be addressed in more depth throughout this report.

Hiring Trends

In addition to the aging workforce, the Government has to contend with the fact that it did relatively little hiring during much of the 1990s, as shown in **Figure 1**. During this time, the Federal Government reduced its workforce by approximately 400,000 employees and limited new hiring efforts.[13] The Government did not significantly ramp up its hiring efforts again until the early 2000s—mostly in response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Figure 1. Number of All Full-Time, Permanent New Hires FY 1990-2005



Includes Professional, Administrative, Technical, Clerical, and Other Occupations
Source: OPM, CPDF

As a result of the downsizing, many agencies scaled back their recruitment programs or abandoned them altogether.[14] During this same time, agencies reduced the number of Federal HR professionals by 20 percent and therefore lost important

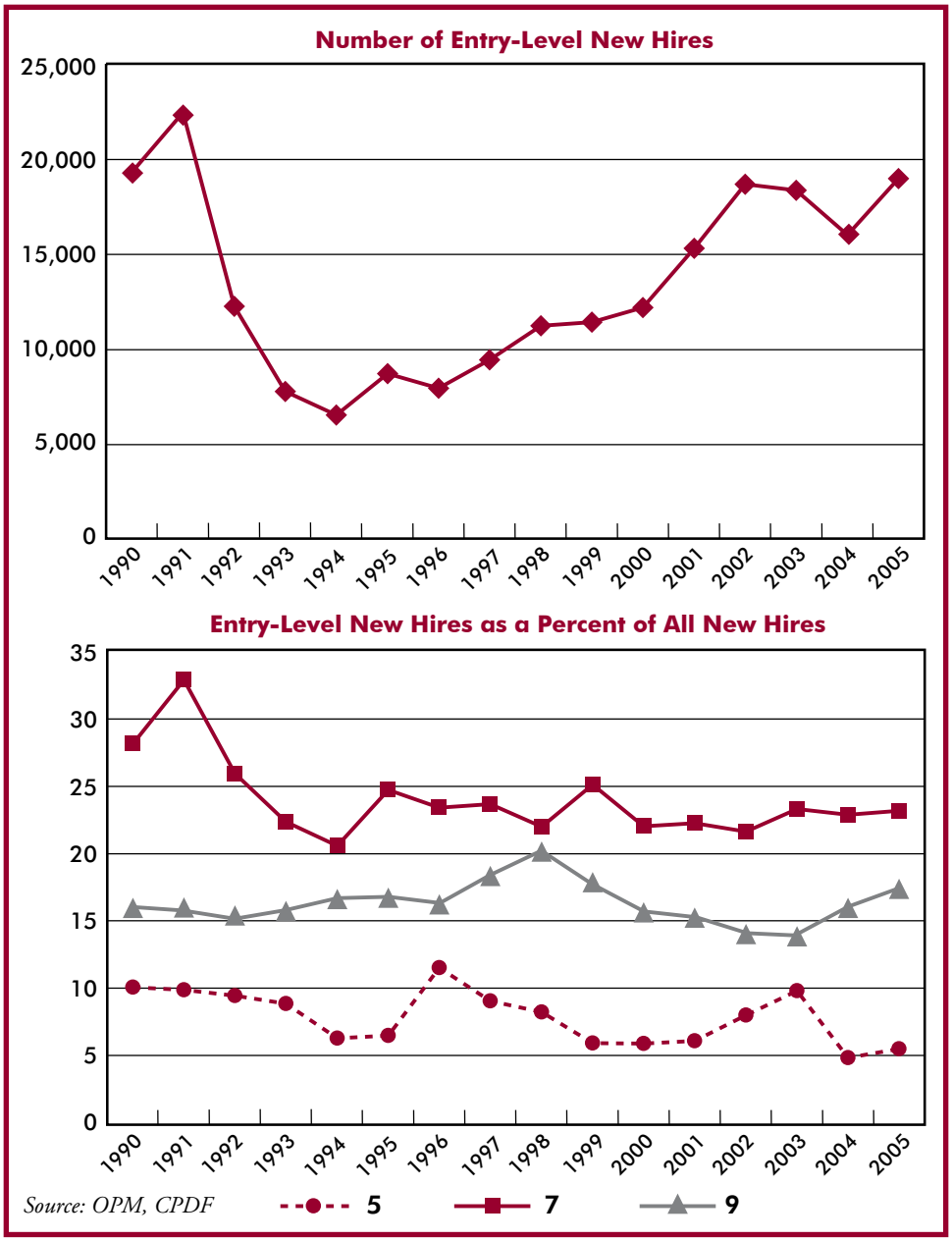
[13] U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Major Management Challenges and Program Risks: A Governmentwide Perspective*, GAO-01-0241, Washington, DC, January 2001, pp. 20-21.

[14] U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *Managing Federal Recruitment: Issues, Insights, and Illustrations*, Washington, DC, September 2004, p. 5.

historical knowledge related to effective recruitment and hiring practices.[15] With this lack of practice and loss of expertise, agencies are re-learning some of the tools of the trade regarding how to best attract and select a high-quality workforce.

As previously noted, this report covers new Federal entry-level (GS-5, 7 and 9) employees who were appointed into full-time, nonseasonal, permanent positions in executive branch professional and administrative occupations.[16] The hiring trends related to these new hires, as displayed in **Figure 2**, demonstrate two points.

Figure 2. Entry-Level New Hires, FY 1990-2005



[15] U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *Federal Human Resources Employment Trends: An Occupation in Transition: A Comprehensive Study of the Federal Human Resources Community*, MSE-9-5, Washington, DC, September 1999, p. 3.

[16] From here, unless otherwise noted, the terms "entry-level new hire" and "new hire" refer to the entry-level new hires that meet this criteria.

First, consistent with the overall Federal hiring pattern, the number of entry-level new hires dropped in the mid-1990s and began to rise toward the end of the 1990s and early 2000s. Second, the proportion of entry-level new hires—as a percent of all new hires—stayed fairly stable from FY 1990 through FY 2005. Fluctuations have been no more than about 5 percent in each grade since approximately 1993.

Demographic Profile

To gain a better understanding of the types of employees agencies are hiring into professional and administrative entry-level positions, it is helpful to look at some of their demographic characteristics. Below is a summary of Federal new hires' demographic profile, as calculated from the FY 2005 CPDF (the same file from which our survey participants were randomly selected).

Diversity. Entry-level new hires are fairly diverse. In FY 2005, Blacks represented 13 percent of the new hires; Asians 6 percent; and Native Americans 1 percent. Blacks, Asians and Native Americans were at or above the Civilian Labor Force (CLF) representation for that year, as calculated by OPM.[17] Hispanics and women were somewhat underrepresented. Hispanics represented 9 percent and women 43 percent of the new hires but 13 and 46 percent of the CLF, respectively.[18]

Military Service. Veterans are well represented in the professional and administrative entry-level population. They accounted for about 18 percent of the professional and administrative entry-level employees hired in FY 2005, compared with 21.5 percent of all Federal new hires—which includes technical and blue-collar occupations that are popular occupational categories for veterans.[19]

Education. Entry-level new hires are well educated. CPDF data show that 56 percent of the FY 2005 new hires had an undergraduate degree and 19 percent had education beyond the undergraduate level.

Grade Level. CPDF data show that entry-level new hires are generally hired at GS-7, and agencies hire more at GS-9 than at GS-5 level. A comparison of FY 2005 new hires indicates that 13 percent were hired at GS-5, 50 percent at GS-7 and 32 percent at GS-9. As seen above in Figure 2, this is a historical trend. There are several potential explanations. Agencies may be looking for people with higher skill levels for these positions than can be found at GS-5. They may face difficulties in recruiting at the GS-5 salary. Or they may be hiring at GS-9 to avoid some of

[17] U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *Annual Report to Congress: Federal Equal Opportunity Recruitment Program, Fiscal Year 2005*.

[18] MSPB is looking more closely at gender and minority hiring and advancement issues in an upcoming study.

[19] U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *Report to Congress: The Employment of Veterans in the Federal Government FY 2005*, November 2006, p. 16.

the assessment requirements for select GS-5 and 7 professional and administrative occupations.[20]

Occupations. Notably, the Government was fairly consistent from FY 1990 through FY 2005 regarding the occupations into which it hired entry-level employees. The top 10 occupations for FY 2005 are listed in **Table 1**. Of these top 10 occupations, 6 (nursing, contracting, information technology management, auditing, criminal investigator and miscellaneous administration) were also in the top 10 most populous occupations for fiscal years 2000, 1995 and 1990.

Table 1. Top 10 Occupations for Which the Federal Government Hired Professional and Administrative Entry-Level New Hires, FY 2005

Occupation	Occupational Series	Percent of Entry-Level New Hires
1. Social Insurance Administration	0105	13.5
2. Customs and Border Protection Officer	1895	6.1
3. Miscellaneous Administration	0301	5.5
4. Contracting	1102	4.7
5. Auditing	0511	4.3
6. Information Technology Management	2210	3.6
7. Natural Resources/Biological Sciences	0401	3.4
8. Nurse	0610	3.3
9. Criminal Investigator	1811	3.0
10. Management/Program Analyst	0343	2.6

Source: OPM, CPDF

Agencies. The Government has also been rather consistent as to which agencies do the most hiring. The top hiring agencies for FY 2005 are shown in **Table 2**. Seven of them (Army, Air Force, Navy, Veterans Affairs, Treasury, Commerce and Justice) were also among the top 10 hiring agencies for fiscal years 2000, 1995 and 1990. These seven agencies have historically been among the largest in Government, so it is not surprising that they would consistently hire the highest percentages of new hires. SSA, which was reinstated as an independent agency in 1995, was among the top 10 hiring agencies in 2000 and 2005 as it has tried to deal with its retiring workforce while getting ready to handle its mission to serve the upcoming surge of American retirees.

[20] The *Luevano* consent decree requires agencies to use court-approved assessment procedures for about 120 entry-level occupations at the GS-5/7 grades. Generally, agencies use the Administrative Careers with America (ACWA) self-rating schedule, but there are complaints that the administration of the rating schedule is untimely, burdensome and hinders their ability to reach applicants they spent time and resources recruiting. This has led some agencies to hire at the GS-9 level to avoid the requirement to use the court-approved assessment procedures.

Table 2. Top Hiring Agencies for Professional and Administrative Entry-Level Hires, FY 2005	
Agency	**Percent of Entry-Level New Hires**
1. Social Security Administration	16.2
2. Department of the Army	15.0
3. Department of Homeland Security	10.9
4. Department of the Air Force	7.6
5. Department of the Navy	7.4
6. Department of Veterans Affairs	6.7
7. Department of Defense	6.1
8. Department of the Treasury	5.2
9. Department of Commerce	3.2
10. Departments of Justice and Agriculture	3.0

Source: OPM, CPDF

Hiring Authorities

The hiring authorities used to bring entry-level hires on board say a lot about how the protection of merit is actually practiced in the Federal civil service. The merit system principles call for recruitment from all segments of society and selection based on relative ability after fair and open competition. The competitive examining process was designed to help meet these goals.[21] However, that examining process has been criticized for being too long, too complicated and not user-friendly. Hiring trends over the 16 year period of 1990 to 2005 indicate that for entry-level hires, agencies prefer to use authorities that provide streamlined procedures with fewer eligibility requirements than competitive examining. In the 1990s, Outstanding Scholar was the preferred authority; in the 2000s, it is the Federal Career Intern Program. While these authorities may result in faster hires and make it easier to hire applicants identified through targeted recruitment activities, if used improperly, they may also undermine fair and open competition, as explained below.

Outstanding Scholar

The Outstanding Scholar program was established by the *Luevano* consent decree, which was approved by the United States District Court for the District of

[21] As defined by OPM's *Operating Manual for Qualification Standards*, the competitive examination is open to all applicants and "may consist of a written test, an evaluation of an applicant's education and experience, and/or an evaluation of other attributes necessary for successful performance in the position to be filled." This examination process is used to fill civil service positions and enables candidates who apply from outside the Federal workforce, as well as Federal employees without civil service status, to compete for a permanent appointment in the civil service.

Columbia on November 19, 1981. The decree resolved a law suit alleging that the Government's Professional and Administrative Career Examination, used to assess applicants for about 120 occupations at GS-5 and GS-7 levels, had an adverse impact on African American and Hispanic applicants. As part of the decree, the court created the Outstanding Scholar program as a temporary competitive hiring authority to be used while OPM developed valid alternative examinations for the affected occupations.

To be eligible for an Outstanding Scholar appointment, candidates must have earned an undergraduate grade point average of 3.45 or above (on a 4.0 scale) or be in the top 10 percent of their graduating class. While positions must be publicly posted, appointments are not subject to veterans' preference and can be made without assessing candidates' relative ability against other applicants.

Outstanding Scholar was meant to be a supplement to competitive examining to help agencies better target minority candidates. However, because the authority could be used to easily recruit and hire college graduates, it became the primary means of entry-level hiring for the 120 occupations covered by the consent decree. At its peak in 1994, Outstanding Scholar accounted for 46 percent of new hire appointments versus 11 percent for competitive examining.[22]

In 1998, the Department of Justice and OPM became concerned that Outstanding Scholar had become the primary hiring vehicle for GS-5 and 7 professional and administrative positions. They strongly urged agencies to evaluate their use of this authority to determine if they were using it within the intended parameters.[23]

In 2000, MSPB published a study showing that the program not only fails to help agencies achieve representation, but it also conflicts with the idea of merit. The report demonstrated that Outstanding Scholar hiring limits fair and open competition because only college graduates can be considered for positions that often do not require a college degree. It limits selection based on relative ability because it relies on grade point average as the primary assessment. Research presented later in this report shows that grade point average is not a good predictor of job performance. Although the intent of the program was to supplement competitive examining, many agencies were using it instead of competitive examining. Finally, the study found that minority candidates benefited more from competitive examining than Outstanding Scholar.[24]

Since the publication of these warnings by OPM, Justice and MSPB, agencies' use of the Outstanding Scholar program has declined dramatically. By the end of FY 2005, Outstanding Scholar accounted for less than 5 percent of all entry-level

[22] U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *Restoring Merit to Federal Hiring: Why Two Special Hiring Programs Should Be Ended*, Washington, DC, January 2000, p. 7.

[23] U.S. Office of Personnel Management, "Memorandum for Directors of Personnel from Carol J. Okin, Outstanding Scholar Program Authorities," July 13, 1998.

[24] MSPB, *Restoring Merit to Federal Hiring*.

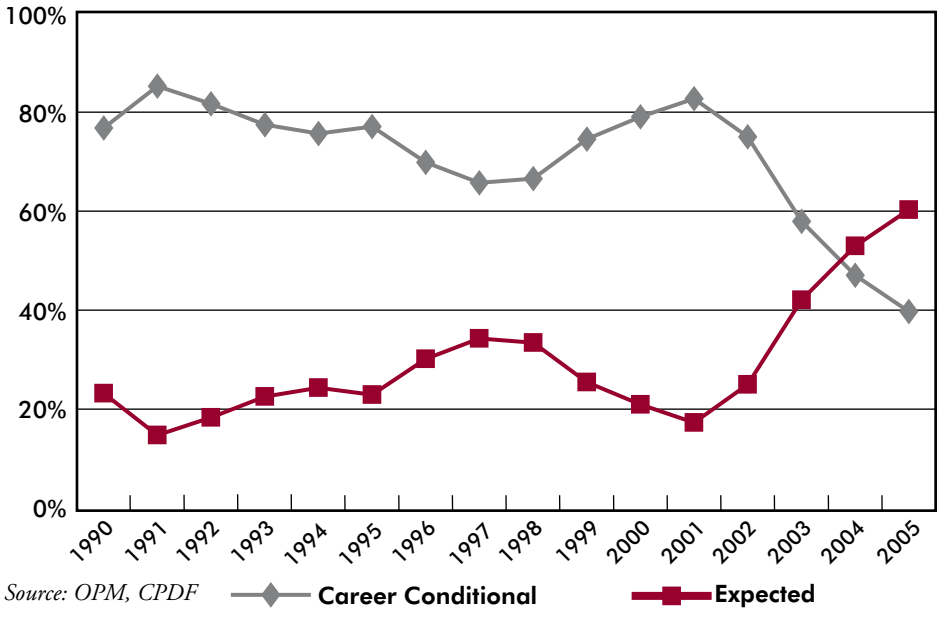
appointments. Then, in 2005, MSPB issued two decisions related to Outstanding Scholar—*Dean v. Department of Agriculture*, 99 M.S.P.R. 533 (2005), and *Olson v. Department of Veterans Affairs*, 100 M.S.P.R. 322 (2005). The Board held that the agencies had violated the applicants' veterans' preference rights by using Outstanding Scholar to hire candidates with no veterans' preference into competitive positions. In response to those decisions, OPM has strongly advised agencies against further use of the Outstanding Scholar hiring authority.

Excepted Service and the Federal Career Intern Program

As the use of the Outstanding Scholar authority has decreased, the number of entry-level new hires being brought into the Government through excepted appointments has increased.[25] It is not clear whether there is a "cause and effect" relationship between the two, but excepted appointments do provide some of the same perceived advantages as Outstanding Scholar.

Historically, competitive examining appointments were the primary authority used for entry-level hiring. Excepted appointments, however, now exceed the number of new hires brought in through competitive examining career-conditional appointments. **Figure 3** shows the percent of new hires brought in under the two types of appointments between 1990 and 2005.

Figure 3. Percent of Career Conditional vs. Excepted Appointments for Entry-Level New Hires, FY 1990-2005



Source: OPM, CPDF

[25] Excepted service appointments are exempted from the competitive examining process when competitive examining is deemed impracticable for the position or agency. Applicants' qualifications are evaluated against what is needed to perform the job, but not necessarily against the qualifications of other applicants, making recruitment and assessment rules less proscriptive than those in the competitive service.

The primary driver of this new trend was the establishment of the excepted service Federal Career Intern Program (FCIP) in 2000. As an alternative to the competitive examining process, the FCIP provides streamlined hiring procedures with relatively few eligibility and procedural requirements. These procedures give agencies flexibility in recruiting, assessing and selecting candidates. Agencies can then convert interns to the competitive service if the interns successfully complete a 2-year training and development program. In addition, the Board has found that the FCIP, unlike Outstanding Scholar, is a valid exception to the competitive examination requirement set out in 5 U.S.C. § 3304 because it was expressly authorized by an Executive Order promulgated under 5 U.S.C. § 3302.[26]

The use of FCIP has skyrocketed since its inception. By FY 2005, FCIP appointments accounted for about 45 percent of the new hires covered by this study and for over 60 percent of the study's GS-5 and 7 new hires, which are the two grades generally hired for using this authority. Delegated examining (the typical authority used for competitive appointments) accounted for just under 20 percent of all entry-level hires GS-5, 7 and 9.[27] All other hiring authorities—including Veterans' Employment Opportunity Act, Outstanding Scholar, Veterans Recruitment Appointment and Direct Hire—were each in the single digits.[28]

Excepted service hiring, such as that occurring with FCIP, can address many of the perceived flaws in the competitive process. As noted in previous MSPB research reports, it can streamline recruitment and assessment practices, allow for faster hiring decisions and provide agencies the ability to tailor their recruitment procedures to meet mission requirements.[29] On the other hand, the streamlined processes can negatively impact merit if agencies are not careful in how they use the authorities.

Fair and Open Competition. In the competitive service, fair and open competition is achieved through "public notice." Public notice requires agencies to notify OPM of vacancies for which applicants outside of the agency may apply, and they are required to post those jobs on USAJOBs—the Government's official employment Web site. Excepted service positions are not subject to these public notice requirements. However, they are still subject to the merit system principles, so agencies must interpret what "fair and open" means for excepted appointments.[30]

[26] *Gingery v. Department of Defense*, 105 M.S.P.R. 671 (2007).

[27] As defined by OPM's Delegated Examining Operations Handbook, the delegated examining authority is "an authority OPM grants to agencies to fill competitive civil service jobs with: applicants applying from outside the Federal workforce, Federal employees who do not have competitive service status, or Federal employees with competitive service status. Appointments made by agencies through delegated examining authority are subject to civil service laws and regulations."

[28] For a broader discussion regarding the Federal Government's use of hiring authorities in all grades and occupations, see U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *Federal Hiring Authorities: Cutting Through the Confusion*, Washington, DC, 2007.

[29] MSPB, *Reforming Federal Hiring: Beyond Faster and Cheaper*, pp. 31-32.

[30] 5 U.S.C. § 3327 and 3330.

Choosing how to let applicants know about job vacancies can help agencies effectively target recruitment strategies and keep from being overwhelmed by applications from people who are not qualified for the position. However, as discussed above regarding the Outstanding Scholar Program, unnecessarily narrowing recruitment may hinder fair and open competition by precluding highly qualified individuals from learning about the jobs, affecting the long-term quality of the Federal workforce. In fact, MSPB's research suggests that information about at least one type of excepted service position—the Federal Career Internship—is frequently difficult for potential applicants to find.[31]

For instance, if an agency continually recruits from only one or two local colleges because those colleges provided good candidates in the past, the agency is likely to miss high-quality candidates from other potential sources. Furthermore, it would be inadvertently granting preference to college graduates from those specific schools. In addition, research has shown that just because a recruitment source has resulted in good selections in the past does not mean it will continually generate good selections over time.[32]

When using excepted service appointments, agencies should be cautious in designing their recruitment strategies so that they do not unnecessarily narrow the pool of qualified applicants, thereby limiting fair and open competition.

Selection Based on Relative Ability. Because public notice is not required for excepted service positions, recruitment strategies to fill them can lead to smaller applicant pools. In addition, excepted service positions do not require the rating of candidate abilities and ranking them in order of the most highly qualified. With fewer applicants and fewer assessment requirements, the use of good assessment tools becomes even more important to ensure that the applicants have the skills necessary to perform the job.

However, agencies tend to use assessment practices that are not good predictors of future performance. For instance, when hiring Federal Career Interns, selecting officials and HR staff tend to rely on interviews, evaluation of training and experience, recommendations and/or grade point average (GPA).[33] These, we will see later, are not good at measuring candidates' relative ability or predicting their future job performance. Even though excepted service authorities allow for streamlined assessment procedures, it is in the public's best interest to ensure that the assessments used are adequate predictors of job performance.

[31] U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *Building a High-Quality Workforce: The Federal Career Intern Program*, Washington, DC, September 2005, p. 23.

[32] Kevin D. Carlson, Mary L. Connelly, and Ross L. Mecham III, "Recruitment Evaluation: The Case for Assessing the Quality of Applicants Attracted," *Personnel Psychology*, 2002, vol. 55, Iss. 2, pp. 461-490.

[33] MSPB, *Building a High-Quality Workforce*, p. 26.

In looking at the hiring trends and demographic profile of Federal entry-level new hires, we see the recent increase in the volume of hires but little change in the composition of new hires over the 16 years examined. The Government has continued hiring for many of the same occupations. Similar agencies have been doing the majority of the hiring. The percentage of entry-level hires to all new hires has not changed significantly, and the grades at which entry-level new hires enter have remained fairly consistent.

In addition, agencies continue to look for hiring authorities that help make the process faster, more efficient and more capable of helping them meet mission requirements than the competitive examining process. Unfortunately, if not used properly, these authorities can short-circuit the principles of fair and open competition and selection based on relative ability. The fact that agencies continually opt out of the competitive examining process indicates that there are fundamental problems with the overall system. Therefore, while we urge agencies to evaluate their recruitment and selection practices to ensure that they adhere to the merit system principles, the Government needs to start thinking about longer term hiring reform that addresses problems associated with competitive examining.

Who They Are: Age and Experience of Entry-Level New Hires

Recently, MSPB asked several groups of public human resources professionals the question: When you think of an entry-level new hire, what characteristics come to mind? They responded as most would probably expect—an entry-level new hire is a young, professionally inexperienced, recent college graduate.

While that may be the popular perception, it is not the reality for Federal entry-level new hires. Rather, Federal entry-level new hires are much more diverse in terms of age, experience and background.

This was a surprising finding, even to us. It made us want to explore more in depth the factors of age and experience to see if there are systemic barriers in the hiring process that might give an advantage or disadvantage to certain applicants based on nonmerit reasons.

Age

The age of Federal entry-level hires was the first indication that they are different from popular expectations. CPDF data show that the average age of the Federal new hire in FY 2005 was 33 years old, in contrast to the 22- and 23- year olds many would expect to see.

The average age is largely affected by the range of new hires' age, which was rather broad at 21 to 84 years old. Because of this variance, it is helpful to look at the median age, which was 29.[34] This means that 50 percent of the hires appointed in FY 2005 were over age 29 and 50 percent were under age 29—still older than one might expect.

We can reasonably expect GS-9 new hires to be older than those at GS-5 or GS-7 because the higher grade requires either work experience or an advanced education. Therefore, we looked at the age of just GS-5 and 7 new hires in the CPDF for FY 2005. They too were older than expected, with an average age of 31 and a median age of 27.

[34] The median is found by arranging numeric data in order and selecting the number that falls in the middle of the range. The median is a particularly useful measure of central tendency when the distribution of the data has extreme values that would otherwise skew the average.

Table 3. Average and Median Ages of Professional and Administrative Entry-Level Hires		
CPDF FY 2005 Data	**Average Age**	**Median Age**
All	33	29
Competitive	34	32
Excepted	31	28
FCIP	30	27
GS-5/7	31	27
Nonpreference-Eligible	31	28
CPDF Historical Data		
FY 1990–2005—All	32	29
FY 1990—All	31	28

Quite often, agencies hire new employees who previously served in the military and have preference eligibility.[35] Therefore, it might be reasonable to assume that these preference eligible new hires would be older because they generally served in the military for 2 years or more, and many retired from military service to begin new careers as civilians. So, we also looked at the age of new hires who did not have preference eligibility. According to the CPDF, new hires with no preference eligibility were still, on average, 31 years old with a median age of 28.

In fact, this higher-than-expected-age for entry-level new hires is not a new phenomenon. The CPDF shows that the average age for new hires in FY 1990 was 31, with a median of 28. While younger than today's new hires, the 1990 average age was still considerably older than most would expect for an entry-level new hire. And the average age from fiscal years 1990 through 2005 was 32, with a median of 29.

The CPDF also indicates that new hires appointed through competitive examining procedures in FY 2005 were somewhat older than those appointed through excepted service procedures. The average age of a competitive service new hire was 34, and the median was 32. Excepted service new hires were, on average, 31 years old with a median age of 28. Even FCIP hires, who are largely recruited from college campuses, had an average age of 30 and a median age of 27. Recruitment and assessment practices are the key differences between the excepted and competitive service hiring processes. Therefore, in a later section, we look more closely at the effect Federal recruitment and assessment processes may have on age when hired.

[35] Veterans' preference is a hiring benefit afforded to applicants who meet certain criteria related to military service. Qualifying criteria are listed in 5 U.S.C. § 2108.

Experience

Length of Experience

Contrary to popular perceptions, many entry-level new hires had some full-time work experience before joining the Government. Thirty-two percent of our survey participants reported having 1 to 5 years of full-time work experience before accepting a Federal job. Even more surprising, almost 20 percent reported more than 20 years of work experience before joining the Government, and 17 percent had 11 to 20 years. Conversely, only 17 percent had less than 1 year of full-time work experience.

In addition to being younger, our survey's excepted service new hires also tended to be less experienced than those hired under competitive examining procedures. About 21 percent of excepted service new hires reported having less than 1 year of full-time work experience, compared to only 10 percent of competitive service new hires. Only 14 percent had over 20 years of experience, compared to 26 percent of the competitive service hires.

Type of Experience

In our new hire survey, we asked participants what they were doing immediately before they began working for the Federal Government. The responses to this question, shown in **Table 4**, again contradict the image of an inexperienced entry-level employee. While almost a quarter of the participants (24 percent) indicated that they came to the Government directly after attending school, the largest segment of new hires (30 percent) were working for a private sector company that was not a Federal contractor. Another 36 percent were working for a state or local government; a Federal contractor; the military or the Coast Guard; a school, college, or university; a nonprofit organization; or for themselves. These responses indicate that many Federal new hires do in fact have some real world experience when they enter Government service.

As with the length of experience, the type of experience differed for excepted service new hires compared with competitive service new hires. Excepted service new hires came predominantly from two sources—private sector companies (31 percent) and directly from school (29 percent). The third largest segment came from a state or local government at 9 percent.

Table 4. What Survey Participants Were Doing Prior to Their Federal Job

Type of Experience	All	Competitive	Excepted
Private company	30%	27%	31%
Attending school	24%	15%	29%
State/local government	10%	13%	9%
Federal contractor	8%	12%	6%
For a school/university	6%	6%	6%
Not employed	6%	8%	6%
Military/Coast Guard	6%	11%	4%
Nonprofit	4%	3%	5%
Other	3%	4%	3%
Self-employed	2%	3%	2%

Those hired under competitive service hiring authorities were much more diverse in their responses. Their most frequent response, at 27 percent, was a private sector company. In addition, the rest of their answers were more evenly distributed than the responses of the excepted service new hires: attending school (15 percent), state or local government (13 percent), Federal contractor (12 percent), military (11 percent) and down from there.

Not surprisingly, when broken out by age, a larger segment of the under 30 participants (40 percent) came to the Government directly out of school. Thirty percent came from a private sector company. Participants 30 and over were more diverse in their responses, though the largest segment (29 percent) came from a private company. These responses are similar to those broken out by hiring authority, suggesting a link between hiring authority and new hires' level of experience.

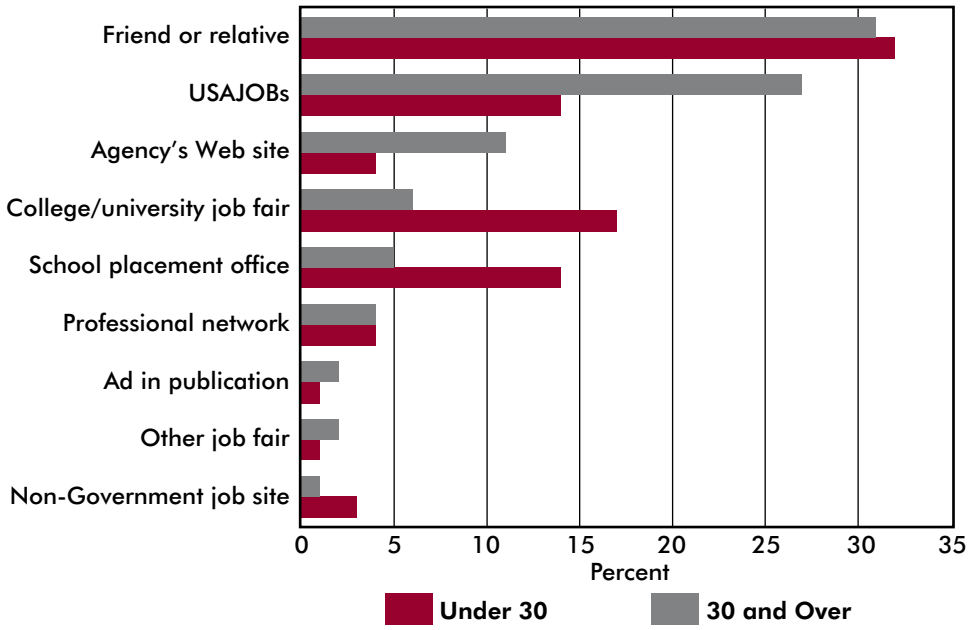
Potential Factors to Explain Age and Experience

The older, experienced entry-level worker is an interesting phenomenon who seems contrary to popular perceptions of what a new hire is. These attributes are not bad or inappropriate provided that selection was based on relative ability after fair and open competition. However, these findings do raise the question as to whether there may be barriers in the Federal hiring process that are a disadvantage for younger applicants who do not have work experience but may have great potential. Therefore, we explored several factors to help explain why the Government is attracting this group of unexpectedly older and more experienced new hires.

Recruitment Strategies

To identify if different recruitment strategies attract different types of new hires, we asked survey participants how they first learned about their Federal job. In particular, we compared the responses of new hires under 30 to those new hires 30 and over to identify any noteworthy differences that might help explain the unexpected age and experience levels of new hires.[36] The answers are displayed in **Figure 4**.

Figure 4. How Survey Participants First Learned of Their Federal Job



For both the younger (under 30) and older (30 and over) new hires, the largest portion of survey participants found out about their job through a friend or relative (32 percent and 31percent respectively). After that source, new hires 30 and over tended to rely on the Internet, such as USAJOBs (27 percent) and agency Web sites (11 percent). New hires under 30 relied on college-related sources, with college/university job fairs and college placement officials combining for almost a third of the total responses (31 percent). This response was obviously driven by the survey participants who came to the Government directly after attending school—29 percent of those heard about the job at a college fair and 23 percent from a school placement official. However, of those participants under 30 who did not come directly from school, 17 percent still cited college sources as how they first learned of their job.

[36] We chose age 30 as the cut-off to compare "younger" and "older" new hires to ensure that we had a large enough sample of new hires in each group to draw valid conclusions. A cut-off age of 22 or 23 would have resulted in too small a group to generalize the findings.

These findings seem to indicate that younger new hires tend to rely more on personal recruitment sources, particularly those who come to them—such as a college recruiter or school placement official. Older new hires are more willing—or find it more necessary—to go in search of opportunities, using sources such as USAJOBs and agency Web sites. Generational research supports this finding. The Partnership for Public Service interviewed and surveyed a sample of college students and found that they clearly expect to be pursued by potential employers, including Federal agencies.[37]

This may help explain why excepted service new hires are somewhat younger than competitive service new hires. Excepted service hiring rules are less proscriptive than competitive examining and make it easier to present job offers to the applicants whom agencies proactively recruit on college campuses. In fact, 80 percent of the new hires coming directly out of school were hired using excepted service authorities, thereby increasing the number of younger new hires with less experience and decreasing the average age of this group.

On the other hand, the most cited recruitment method used by agencies, as reported in MSPB's 2004 recruitment study, was posting announcements on USAJOBs and agency Web sites. In addition, agencies were just beginning to re-establish recruitment relationships with colleges and universities after a decade of downsizing.[38] These factors may help explain why the Federal Government attracts older new hires. It has not yet become adept at seeking out younger applicants and relies on recruitment strategies that largely attract those 30 and over.

Agencies can use these data to inform their recruitment strategies. To ensure that they are reaching "all segments of society" with their recruitment efforts—including all age segments—agencies should use a balanced recruitment strategy. A balanced strategy includes not only passive recruitment sources, such as posting vacancy announcements to USAJOBs, but also proactive recruitment strategies, including visiting colleges and universities that have academic programs specific to the job being filled. Ultimately, a balanced recruitment strategy can help agencies reach applicants who have a more diverse set of skills, abilities and potential to help accomplish their missions.

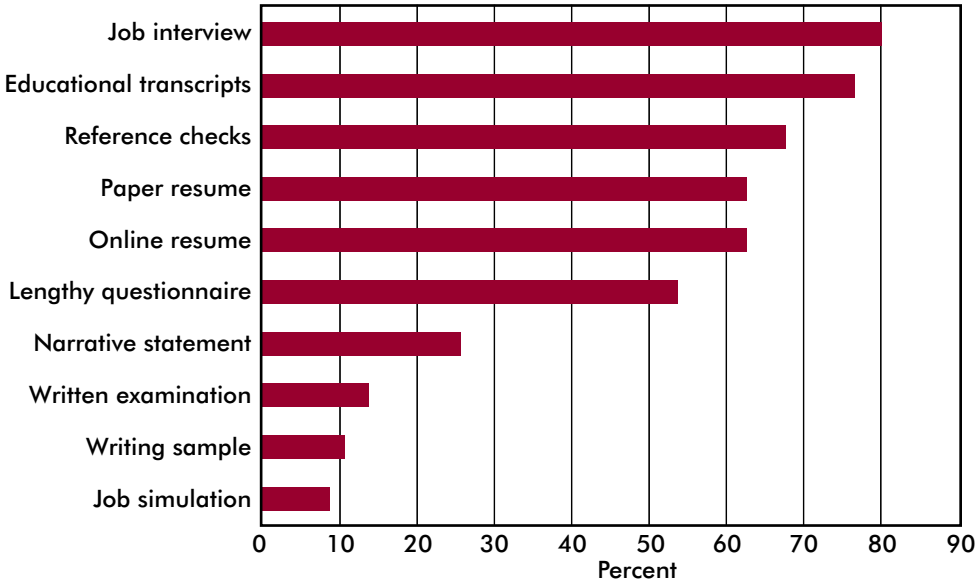
[37] Partnership for Public Service, *Back to School: Rethinking Federal Recruiting on College Campuses*, Washington, DC, May 2006, p. 14.

[38] MSPB, *Managing Federal Recruitment*, pp. 10-11.

Federal Assessment Practices

Federal assessment practices may also affect the age and experience of entry-level new hires. We asked survey participants what steps they completed during the application process. Their responses are captured in **Figure 5**.[39]

Figure 5. Percent of Survey Participants Reporting the Following Steps Were Completed in the Hiring Process



Much research has been conducted to compare the results of assessment methods with actual job performance. This research tells us that different applicant assessment tools vary in their ability to predict how well a job applicant will perform once on the job. **Table 5** shows these validity scores for various applicant assessment tools.[40]

[39] Note that there is no significant difference between which steps were reportedly used most when the data are broken out by age or by excepted/competitive service positions.

[40] The "validity score" refers to the ability of an assessment tool to predict how well an applicant will perform on the job—the closer the score is to +1, the stronger the relationship between the assessment tool results and future job performance.

Table 5. Validity Scores of Selected Assessment Methods[41]	
Assessment Procedure	**Validity Score**
Work Sample Tests	0.54
Structured Interviews	0.51
General Mental Ability Tests	0.51
Job Knowledge Tests	0.48
Training and Experience (behavioral consistency model)	0.45
Job Try-Out Procedure	0.44
Unstructured Interviews	0.38
Biographical Data Measures	0.35
Reference Checks	0.26
Grade Point Average	0.20
Years of Job Experience	0.18
Training and Experience (point method)	0.11
Years of Education	0.10
Graphology (handwriting analysis)	0.02

When comparing the steps used in the application process **(Fig. 5)** to the assessment method validity scores **(Table 5)**, one thing is apparent: agencies are not using assessments that are good predictors of future performance.[42]

For instance, the most popular assessment—the job interview—can be one of the most predictive assessments if it is conducted in a structured style. However, MSPB research indicates that agencies generally rely on unstructured interviews, which have a lower predictive value.[43] Also, educational transcripts (the second most cited assessment tool) may tell the employer the amount of education or grade point average of the applicant. However, these are not very predictive of job performance, particularly if there is a gap of time between the education and the entry on duty.

[41] The validity scores for all of the listed assessments except for GPA are from Frank L. Schmidt and John E. Hunter, "The Validity and Utility of Selection Methods in Personnel Psychology: Practical and Theoretical Implications of 85 Years of Research Findings," *Psychological Bulletin*, the American Psychological Association, Inc., vol. 124, No. 2, September 1998, p. 265. A short definition of each listed assessment can also be found in this article. The validity score for GPA is from MSPB, *Restoring Merit to Federal Hiring: Why Two Special Hiring Programs Should Be Ended*, p. 17. That report also contains an expanded discussion on why GPA is not considered to be a good predictor of job performance.

[42] The differences in how well these assessments predict future performance are actually larger than might appear in Table 5. Squaring the validity score estimates the variability in an employee's performance that can be predicted by an assessment tool. So, a structured interview predicts 26 percent of the variability in how well applicants will do on the job, whereas GPA predicts only 4 percent—making structured interviews almost 7 times more predictive than GPA.

[43] U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *The Federal Selection Interview: Unrealized Potential*, Washington, DC, February 2003.

Agency assessments tend to rely on ratings of training and experience (point method), which research has found are not good predictors of future performance. For instance, when evaluating resumes, narrative statements and questionnaires regarding work, education, training and personal history, agencies generally give applicants points for exposure to certain training or experience rather than evaluating the actual skills developed during that training or work experience. This approach not only lowers the validity of the assessment, but it also favors those who have a certain level of training or experience over those who may have higher potential—thereby benefiting older, more experienced applicants simply by virtue of their having worked more years.

Training and experience assessments are particularly unsuitable for entry-level jobs. The purpose of an entry-level position is not to hire someone who can come into the job and hit the ground running. The purpose is to hire someone the agency can prepare and develop for journey-level positions in the future. Therefore, selecting officials should be focusing on the long-term potential of the applicants, not just what jobs they have held in the past.

The use of training and experience assessments is a particular problem for professional and administrative applicants applying for GS-5 and 7 positions covered by the previously discussed Luevano consent decree. They are generally required to complete the "Administrative Careers With America" (ACWA) rating schedule. Until recently, this rating schedule contained 156 multiple-choice items that asked applicants about their work, education and personal history. Sixty-two percent of our survey's new hires who were hired into GS-5 and 7 occupations reported filling out "a lengthy questionnaire that contained questions concerning my work, education and personal history."

MSPB has identified several problems with the use of the ACWA rating schedule. In particular, the rating schedule generally assesses training and experience rather than potential. OPM recently announced the release of the Assessment Delivery System, which contains streamlined versions of the rating schedule that cover about 80 percent of the Luevano occupations. The new versions reportedly contain about half as many questions but maintained the more highly predictive questions. It is unclear, however, as to whether the new versions of the rating schedule address issues surrounding how well the instrument measures skills and potential versus training and experience. Overall, the utility of the ACWA rating schedule in actually predicting job success has not been proven and may be quite limited.

Ultimately, a good assessment strategy includes assessments with higher validity than those currently being used and that therefore better predict future job performance. For example, job simulation tests or written examinations have proven to be better indicators of how candidates will perform once on the job. However, **Figure 5** demonstrates that these types of assessments are rarely used, most likely because they tend to be more expensive and require a certain level of expertise to develop. They also tend to take more time to administer and often place more burden on the applicant to complete.

Another obstacle may be managers' propensity to prefer experience (a "known" quantity) to potential when making hiring decisions. For instance, a 1998 research study found that public managers only "somewhat agreed" that they would promote someone who showed great potential but only had limited experience over someone with more experience but less potential.[44]

These data indicate that agencies should evaluate how they are assessing their entry-level applicants. If they are using assessments that are based on training and experience, they should determine which other assessments are available to them that are better predictors of future potential. Selecting officials should be focusing on the long-term goal of hiring an employee who can learn and grow with the organization, not the short-term goal of finding someone who can do the entry-level work right now.

Job Requirements

Looking at the top occupations for which the Government hires entry-level employees helps clarify why new hires are more experienced than expected. Many of the top 10 entry-level occupations in FY 2005 required candidates to have specific education, experience or other special characteristics. **Table 6** reminds us of these top 10 occupations.

Table 6. Top Professional and Administrative Entry-Level Occupations for FY 2005

1. Social Insurance Administration
2. Customs and Border Protection Officer
3. Miscellaneous Administration
4. Contracting
5. Auditing
6. Information Technology Management
7. Natural Resources/Biological Sciences
8. Nurse
9. Criminal Investigator
10. Management/Program Analyst

Source: OPM, CPDF

While these occupations look diverse and open to a broad degree of educational experience, a closer look reveals that they are more selective. Four of the ten occupations have minimum education requirements (contracting, auditing, nurse and natural resource/biological sciences), meaning that OPM has determined that

[44] Evan M. Berman and Jonathan P. West, "Responsible Risk-Taking," *Public Administration Review*, July/August 1998, vol. 8, No. 4, p. 348.

the duties of the position cannot be performed by an individual who does not have the prescribed minimum education, generally in a particular field. Three more of the occupations have individual occupational requirements, such as specific technical education or experience for information technology positions and physical requirements for criminal investigators and Customs and Border Protection officers.[45]

Younger, inexperienced candidates can also have a hard time getting their foot in the door because agencies often hire at a higher grade. In 4 of the top 10 occupations (miscellaneous administration, management/program analyst, criminal investigator and information technology management), agencies hired about 50 percent or more of their entry-level employees at GS-9 or the equivalent—meaning that new hires had to have prior relevant work experience or a graduate-level degree.

Hiring at higher grade levels favors candidates who have more experience or higher education levels. And candidates with more experience or higher education are generally older than 22 years. In addition, minimum education and individual occupational requirements often require specific undergraduate academic training. We see below that this factor might also explain why new hires are older.

Education

Characteristics of the undergraduate population may also help explain why new hires are older and more experienced than expected. The National Center for Education Studies (NCES) points out that the undergraduate population is older than it once was. For instance, 39 percent of postsecondary students were 25 years or older in 1999, compared to 28 percent in 1970.[46]

Furthermore, there are fewer "traditional" students on campus than "nontraditional" students. The "traditional" undergraduate is defined as someone who enrolls on a full-time basis directly after finishing high school, depends financially on his or her parents and either does not work or works part-time during the school year. Only 27 percent of students in the 1999–2000 school year met all of these criteria.[47]

Nontraditional undergraduates tend to defer enrollment, attend school part-time, work full-time and/or have dependents at home. Seventy-three percent of all undergraduates were in some way "nontraditional."[48] The prevalence of these characteristics in the undergraduate population would imply that those who finish their degrees do so at an older age than 22. In fact, the average age of a

[45] These requirements are all part of the qualification standards for Federal positions. In the near future, MSPB plans to look at the issue of minimum qualifications and whether factors such as minimum education requirements are the best way to ensure applicants are qualified for these positions or if there are better ways to measure for potential.

[46] U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Nontraditional Undergraduates*, NCES 2002–012, by Susan Choy, Washington, DC, 2002, pp. 1-3.

[47] Education, *Nontraditional Undergraduates*, pp. 1-3. Data are not available to compare to previous school years.

[48] Education, *Nontraditional Undergraduates*, pp. 1-3.

student receiving a Bachelor of Arts degree, as we calculated from the National Postsecondary Student Aid database, was just over 26 years old.[49]

These trends may help explain why at least a portion of Federal new hires are older and more experienced. Twenty-four percent of MSPB's survey participants indicated that they completed their highest education level when they were over 30 years old. Almost 30 percent were 24 to 30 years old. And, as previously mentioned, a large number worked in the private sector prior to their first Federal job. Therefore, they may have deferred Federal employment until they completed their education, meanwhile working in another sector to support themselves while completing the coursework.

Career Planning Decisions

Given the surprising proportion of surveyed new hires who had 20 years or more of work experience (20 percent), it seems that many new hires are starting a second career with the Federal Government. Generational research supports the premise that baby boomers (those born between the mid-1940s and the early 1960s and who are currently reaching or have reached retirement age) often define themselves by who they are at work and will therefore continue to work in alternative careers after their formal retirement.[50] Even a significant number of traditionalists (the generation preceding boomers) expect to continue working either with the same company or in a new field of employment after retirement.[51] Many of the survey participants' narrative comments demonstrate this desire:

- I spent more than 36 years in the military. I wanted to do something where I could support the men and women I once served with and still have the benefit of spending more time with my family.
- After many years of teaching school, including working evenings and weekends, I felt a great need for a change. As I learned more about working for the Federal Government, I was impressed with all it had to offer: service oriented, interesting work, benefits and time to myself at the end of each day.
- As the world is constantly changing, so are its challenges. I feel that with my life experiences and knowledge I can tackle these challenges so that it benefits my family, friends and country.

[49] U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, Data Analysis System, http://nces.ed.gov/dasol/tables.

[50] Lynne C. Lancaster and David Stillman, *When Generations Collide: Who They Are. Why They Clash. How to Solve the Generational Puzzle at Work*, HarperCollins, New York, 2002, p. 129.

[51] Lancaster and Stillman, *When Generations Collide*, p. 203.

While some may be starting new careers, it is also apparent that many new hires are wrapping up their current careers and hoping to supplement their private retirement with Federal benefits. The Federal Government's retirement package includes a fixed pension based on earnings and a tax-deferred retirement savings and investment plan (Thrift Savings Plan or TSP) similar to 401(k) plans offered in the private sector. In addition, retirees with 5 years of continuous enrollment immediately before their retirement continue to receive the full subsidy in the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program. These benefits are attractive to those nearing retirement or who have already retired from another sector and want to supplement their earnings, as demonstrated through some participants' narrative comments:

- At this point, in my career I look forward to learning new things, working as a public servant and having stability and benefits as I plan for retirement in 10 years or so.
- This is a second career for me, so my considerations centered around ensuring that I had the opportunity for a good retirement. 401K plans have been lucrative for me, so the TSP was a selling point.
- I was looking for a position that offered health benefits along with a pension plan. [53 year old participant]

What They Want: Interests, Influences and Intentions

The previous section addressed several factors that could explain why Federal entry-level new hires are older and more experienced. In addition to those possibilities, several recent surveys suggest that interest in Federal employment is low, particularly among younger job applicants. The research shows that college graduates and public policy graduate students tend to view entry-level Government jobs as less challenging, rewarding and professionally beneficial than private and nonprofit sector jobs. They tend to believe that the private sector offers better compensation, more challenging work and better developmental opportunities, while the nonprofit sector offers more rewarding work. Furthermore, many applicants who are interested in Federal employment do not know enough about it to pursue opportunities.[52]

A lack of interest in or information about Federal jobs will make it difficult for the Government to recruit a qualified workforce from all segments of society, as is essential in a merit system. Therefore, to explore whether the above sentiments are shared by the people the Government actually hires, we asked new hires about their impressions of Federal employment, what they were looking for in a job and ultimately what motivated them to accept a Federal job. While the views of the new hires' we surveyed may not reflect the opinions of all potential applicants, they do reflect the views of those who were successful in the Federal hiring process. Therefore, their point of view can help agencies identify how to best market their jobs and attract a broader, more diversified applicant pool.

[52] For instance, see (1) Paul C. Light, *The New Public Service*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington, DC, 1999; (2) Linda J. Bilmes and Jeffrey R. Neal, "The People Factor: Human Resources Reform in Government," *For the People: Can We Fix Public Service?*, John D. Donahue and Joseph S. Nye Jr, Editors, Brookings Institution Press, Washington, DC, 2003; (3) A Peter D. Hart Research Study for the Council for Excellence in Government, *Calling Young People to Government Service: From Ask Not to Not Asked*, March 2004; (4) The Council for Excellence in Government and The Gallup Organization, *Within Reach…But Out of Synch: The Possibilities and Challenges of Shaping Tomorrow's Government Workforce*, December 2006; (5) Partnership for Public Service, *Back to Schoo*l, Washington, DC, 2006.

Employment Goals

Entry-level job seekers often have a set goal in mind when they undertake their job search. They might be looking for a job in a particular field or in a particular employment sector, or they may just be looking for the fastest pay check they can find. We asked Federal new hires to describe their employment goal when they applied for their first Federal job to determine how motivated they were to obtain a Federal job as opposed to "just a job."

Here, we see the first indication that entry-level new hires had rather positive attitudes toward the Federal Government at the time they applied. As shown in **Table 7**, almost one-third of the survey participants were specifically trying to obtain a job with the Federal Government. This answer was particularly popular among new hires who previously worked for a private sector company—potentially indicating that after spending time in the private sector, they were looking for a more promising situation in the Federal sector.

Table 7. Survey Participants' Employment Goal at the Time They Applied for Their Federal Job

Percent	Employment Goal
31	Get a job with the Federal Government
28	Get a job in a particular occupation
22	Get a job in a particular agency
10	Get a job
8	Get a public service-oriented job

When combined with the participants interested in employment with specific Federal agencies (22 percent), over 50 percent of the survey participants were specifically looking for a Federal job when they applied. Another 8 percent were looking for a public service position. So while some of the literature suggests that the general population has low interest in Federal employment, a large percentage of the new hires who are actually hired set out to obtain Federal employment.

Job Offer Attractors

Many Federal stakeholders worry that the Federal Government cannot compete with private sector employers in terms of large salaries and signing bonuses. However, there are other ways to attract high-quality applicants. One way to help ensure that the Federal Government stays competitive is to offer candidates the benefits and work place flexibilities that are most important to them. To help agencies identify which benefits and flexibilities are the best attractors, we asked survey participants how important certain flexibilities were to them when they were considering job offers.

In general, new hires were most interested in traditional benefits currently being offered by the Federal Government:

- 97 percent said **yearly salary increases** were important when considering job offers.
- 94 percent said **vacation** and 89 percent said **sick leave** were important when considering job offers.
- 88 percent said **health insurance** was important when considering job offers.
- 84 percent said a **401(k)-type retirement plan** and 77 percent said a **fixed pension** were important when considering job offers.

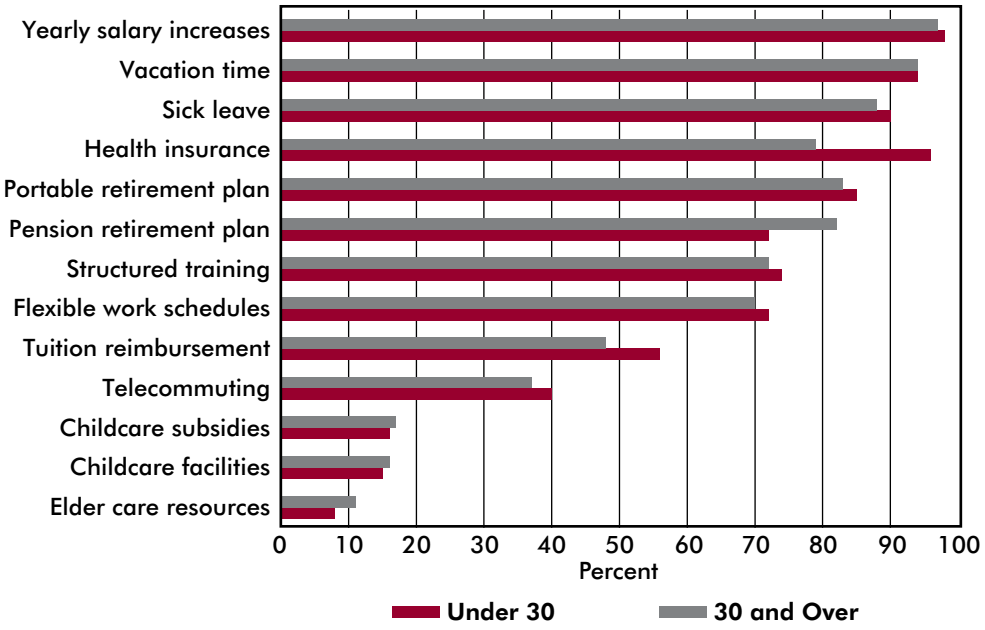
While the survey participants considered traditional benefits to be more important than nontraditional benefits, nontraditional benefits did have a significant following:

- 73 percent said **structured training programs** were important.
- 71 percent wanted a **flexible or alternative work schedule**.
- 52 percent said the option of **tuition reimbursement** was important.
- 39 percent wanted the ability to **telecommute**.

Much of the generational literature suggests that younger employees are less interested in structured, traditional benefits (such as insurance and retirement) and more interested in alternative benefits (such as alternative work schedules and telecommuting).[53] Therefore, we thought that the interest in traditional benefits was perhaps being driven by the older new hires. However, when comparing the responses of the under 30 to those of the 30 and over new hires, we found that there was actually little difference between the two groups—and some traditional benefits were actually more important to younger new hires. The results are shown in **Figure 6**.

[53] For instance, Lancaster and Stillman, *When Generations Collide*, p. 160.

Figure 6. Percent of Survey Participants Indicating Each Factor as Important to Job Offer Considerations



The only significant differences between the two groups were attitudes toward pensions, tuition reimbursement and health insurance. It is not surprising that the preference for pensions was driven by older new hires (10 percent more of the 30 and over participants report it as being important), since a greater proportion of them are preparing for retirement. It is also not surprising that the preference for tuition reimbursement was driven by younger new hires (8 percent more of the under 30 participants reported it as being important), since a greater proportion of them came to the Government directly from school. However, 96 percent of new hires under the age of 30 said that health insurance was important to them when they were considering job offers, compared to 79 percent for the 30 and over group. As a result, health insurance came in second only to annual salary increases for the under 30 group and accounted for the largest difference between the two groups in terms of what is important to their job offer considerations.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that entry-level new hires, regardless of age, consider long-term benefits such as health insurance, retirement and vacation to be important considerations in weighing job offers. This is good for the Federal Government because, as we will see shortly, new hires consider these kinds of benefits to also be a strength of Federal employment. Agencies just need to consider how they can market these traditional benefits when recruiting applicants. However, new hires of all ages are increasingly seeking more alternative work arrangements and nontraditional benefits as well. Therefore, Federal agencies should continue rethinking how they can best meet workforce needs and provide an organizational culture that values these kinds of flexibilities and other benefits as well.

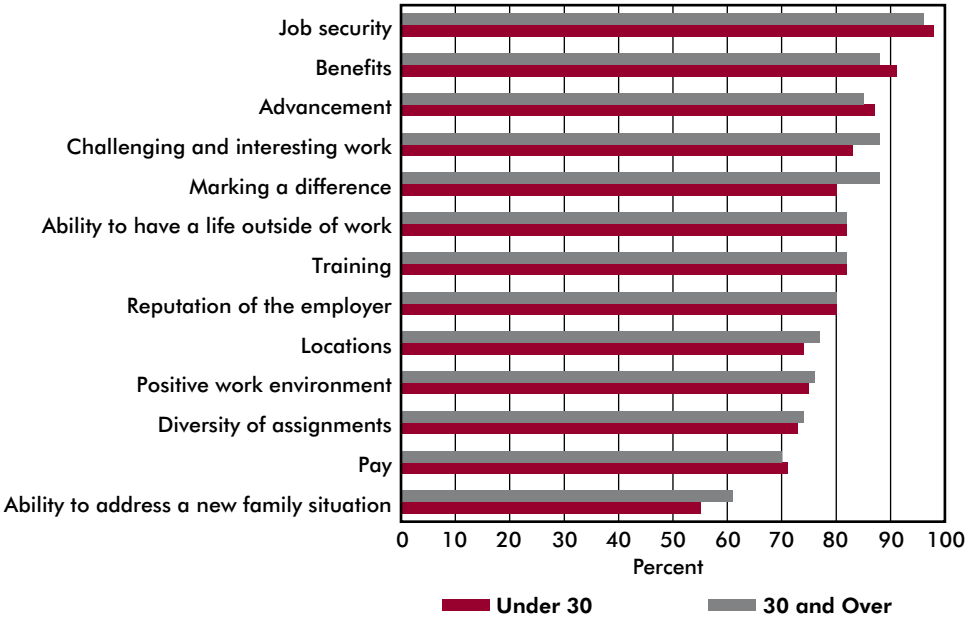
Federal Employment Strengths

As cited at the beginning of this chapter, there are a number of fairly recent studies that have asked younger Americans what they think of the Federal Government as an employer. Some of the research cites as detractors such factors as low Federal pay, slow career progression and an inability to make a difference because of the bureaucracy. To find out what Federal new hires thought about the Government at the time they applied for their job, we asked survey participants what they perceived to be the strengths and weaknesses of Federal employment. We found that Federal new hires—regardless of age—had rather positive impressions of the Government when they applied for their job.

The factors that most participants saw as strengths of Federal employment were not surprising. They included items that are generally accepted as Federal strengths, such as job security (97 percent reported it to be a strength), benefits (89 percent) and the ability to make a difference with the work (84 percent). However, survey participants were fairly positive about issues that some research has identified as potential problem areas for the Federal Government. These include pay (71 percent reported it to be a strength), opportunities for advancement (86 percent), interesting work (85 percent) and reputation of the employing agency (80 percent).

Even when broken out by age, there were few significant differences between the responses of participants under 30 and those 30 and over, as shown in **Figure 7**. Older new hires had slightly better impressions of issues such as challenging and interesting work, making a difference with their work and the ability to address a new family situation. But ultimately, the survey participants rated all of the factors rather positively. The ability to address a new family situation was the only factor to have a rating of less than 70 percent, but that particular factor had a higher rate of "don't know" (32 percent) responses than the other categories.

Figure 7. Percent of Survey Participants Identifying Each Factor as a Strength of Federal Employment



The "It" Factor

So far, we have seen that many new hires set out to find a Federal job, they were attracted by the kinds of benefits the Government offered, and they had positive impressions of Federal employment when they applied. But we also wanted to know what the "it" factor was for new hires. In other words, what was the most important factor that influenced their decision to work for the Government?

This question is particularly important today because the workplace is changing. Generational literature maintains that younger generations are no longer motivated by the notion of job security in terms of long-term employment, promotions up the organizational hierarchy, structured pay progression or other incentives that were popular with past generations.[54] The old employment deal in which employees commit to organizational loyalty in exchange for lifetime employment is no longer applicable. In its place is a new employee contract of shared responsibility in which the employer provides developmental opportunities to make the employee more employable in exchange for the employee's work.[55]

However, the participants in our survey indicate that the old employment contract is not yet dead. When asked what the single most important factor was in their decision to work for the Government, new hires' top answer was job security (28 percent of all participants). It was the number one answer for new hires 30 and over (33 percent), under 30 (23 percent) and even for participants coming directly to the Government from school (21 percent).

We also asked participants to describe in their own words why they chose to work for the Government at this point in their life or career. The written comments demonstrate a variety of compelling reasons for seeking job security:

- Living on my own is very important to me because my family cannot financially support me. Working for the Federal Government allows me to provide financially for myself. I have seen close family members get laid off from private sector jobs and so I was looking for job security when I began working.
- At my age [22 years old] it seemed opportunistic. Working for the Federal Government will give me job security, education and growth. I have opportunities to advance within my career, save money and do a job that makes a difference.
- With small children it was important for me to work somewhere with excellent job security and benefits.
- Federal employment offers benefits, job security, opportunity for advancement and step salary increases—all of which are becoming increasingly more difficult to find in the private sector.

[54] Bruce Tulgan, *Managing Generation X: How to Bring Out the Best in Young Talent*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 2000, p. 272.

[55] Jennifer Koch, "Employee Commitment: Embrace Today's New Deal," *Workforce Management*, downloaded from http://www.workforce.com/archive/feature/22/18/56/index.php on March 15, 2007.

Factors other than job security proved to be important to some new hires, though none of the other categories' scores came close to job security. The answers for all participants are shown in **Table 8**. When broken out by age, there were no significant differences; the two groups' responses did not differ by more than 5 percent in any category except job security, as stated above. These findings indicate that job security is still an important job consideration, so agencies should not be afraid to use it in their marketing messages to potential applicants.

Table 8. Most Important Factors that Influenced Survey Participants' Decision to Work for the Federal Government

Factor	Percent of All Participants
Job security	28
Advancement opportunities	12
Challenging and interesting work	10
Pay	10
Making a difference with my work	9
Benefits	8
Other	7
Ability to have a life outside of work	5
Job site locations	4
Opportunities for training	3
Reputation of the employer	3
Ability to address a new family situation	2
Positive work environment	1
Diversity of assignments	1

Intent to Stay

Generational literature also suggests that, as a result of the change in the employment contract, younger generations are less likely than previous generations to stay with one employer for their entire career. Because they are no longer guaranteed the job security previous generations once were, they follow self-building opportunities that help them develop their skills, enhance their resume and ultimately improve their "career security."[56]

The Government has tended to operate on the assumption that new hires will stay and grow with the agency even though the average tenure of all Federal employees (not just professional and administrative) has decreased from 11.5 years in 2000 to 9.9 years in 2006.[57] A large portion of this decrease was most likely caused by

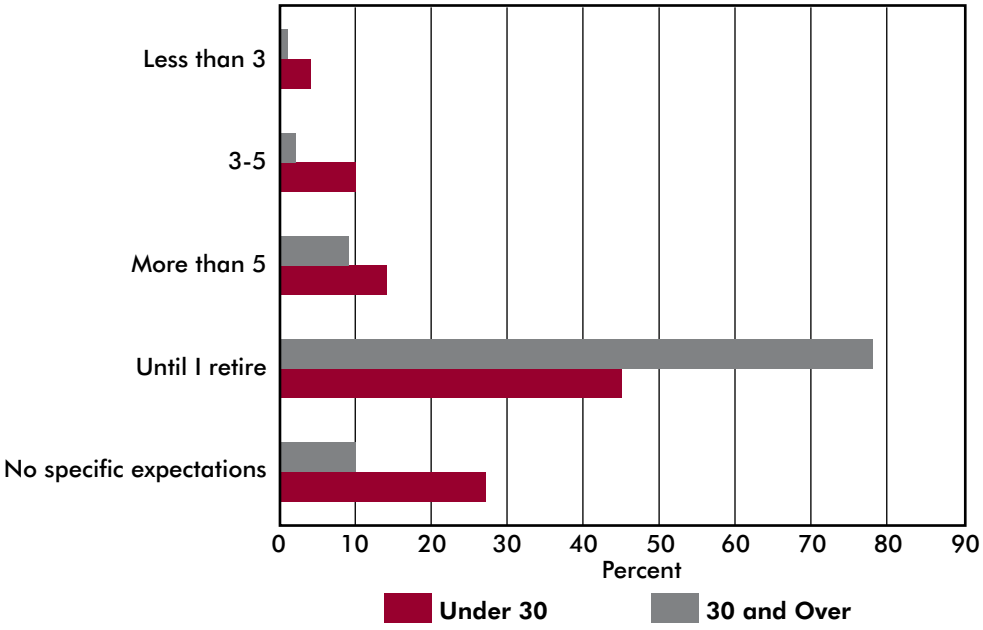
[56] Tulgan, *Managing Generation X*, pp. 12-13.

[57] Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Employee Tenure in 2006," *News*, USDL 06-1563, Sept. 8, 2006.

the increase in new hires since 2001. Regardless, 10 years is still considerably more stable than the average 2006 private sector tenure of 3.6 years for all jobs and 5.2 years for management, professional, and related occupations.[58] So, we decided to explore whether younger Federal new hires are more likely to change employment sectors throughout their career.

When asked how long they expected to work for the Federal Government when they joined, 62 percent of all new hires said until they retire. This response rate was not that surprising because it was largely driven by new hires aged 30 and over. Seventy-eight percent of this group said they planned to stay until retirement, as shown in **Figure 8**.

Figure 8. Number of Years Survey Participants Expected to Work in the Government When They Started Their Job

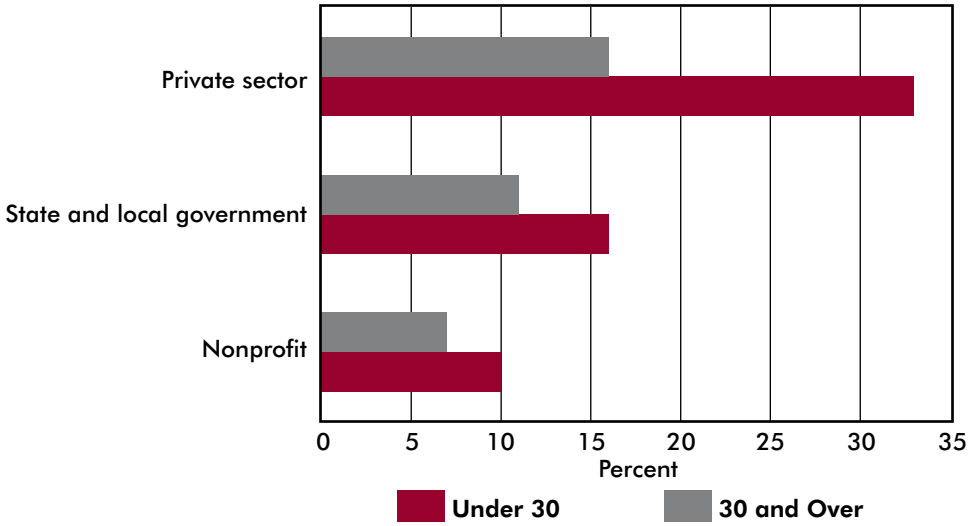


What was surprising was the large number of younger new hires who responded the same. Forty-five percent of new hires under the age of 30 and 36 percent of new hires coming directly out of school said they planned to stay with the Federal Government until they retire. For those under 30, a total of 72 percent said either they planned to stay until they retire or they had no specific expectations when they started working—indicating no firm intentions to search out other employment sectors anytime soon.

[58] Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Employee Tenure in 2006."

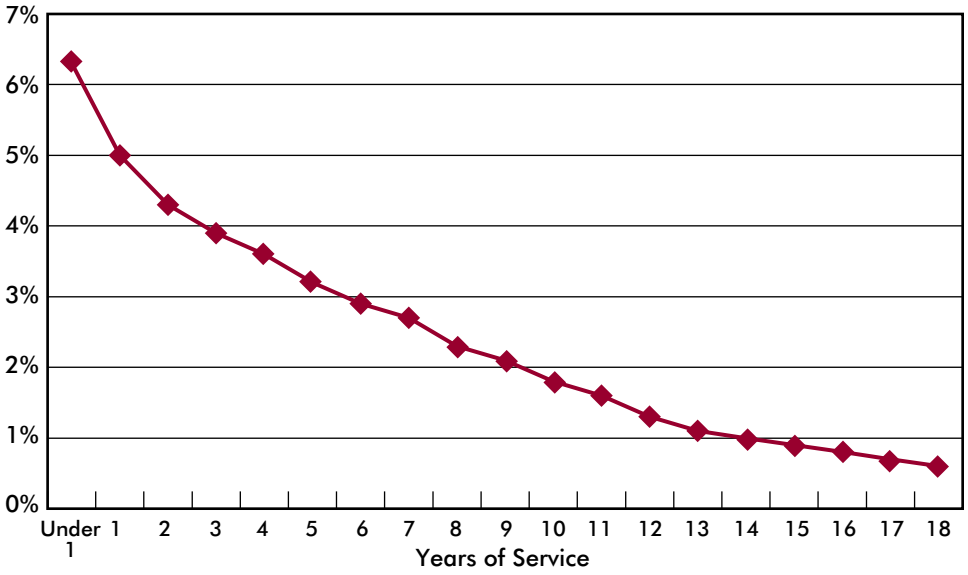
We also asked new hires whether they expect to work in other employment sectors in the next 5 to 10 years. The responses are shown in **Figure 9**. One-third of the under 30 new hires said they are likely to work in the private sector, while only about 16 percent of the 30 and over new hires responded the same. Many fewer reported being likely to work for a state or local government or nonprofit organization. These data do support the idea that younger new hires are slightly more interested in working in other sectors, but they are by no means running for the door.

Figure 9. Percent of Survey Participants Expecting to Work in Another Sector in the Next 5 to 10 Years



Furthermore, research shows that once an employee enters the Federal Government, they are not likely to leave. Retention data from the Central Personnel Data File indicate that if Federal employees do not resign in their first year or two of employment, it becomes more unlikely that they will resign as time passes. This is shown in **Figure 10**. In fact, the pattern has remained consistent since the Government first started tracking it. So once Federal employees get in the door—regardless of generation—the Government may likely retain them through their career.

Figure 10. Resignation Rates FY 2002-2005 Based on Length of Service



In this chapter, we have seen that today's Federal new hires do not necessarily conform to the typical generational stereotypes. They have favorable impressions of and interest in Federal employment when many general public surveys show little interest in such employment. Their job offer considerations are less driven by newer, alternative benefits than would be expected. Also, they are more interested in stability, job security and having a career with the Government than the generational research would imply. While all of this works in the Government's favor, and agencies should use this information to better market careers to applicants, we should ask why all this might be so.

Remember that the survey and CPDF data for this report focused on people who were successful in their Federal job search. Many of them specifically sought out a Federal position, and all of them stuck with the process, which we will see in the next section of this report can be rather lengthy and difficult. This implies that they were fairly determined to obtain a Federal job. Why?

They told us that some of the key reasons were personal security factors such as job security, stability, pensions, annual raises and good benefits. This points to the possibility that the Federal Government attracts new hires who are more risk averse than the larger labor pool.

There is research that supports this. For instance, researchers Don Bellante and Albert Link designed a 1981 study to investigate the relationship between risk aversion and the choice between public and private employment. Using a risk aversion index, they conducted a panel study and found that innately risk-averse individuals are more likely to choose public sector over private sector employment.[59]

[59] Don Bellante and Albert N. Link, "Are Public Sector Workers More Risk Averse Than Private Sector Workers?" *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, vol. 54, No. 5, April 1981, pp. 408-412.

While not conclusive evidence, that study—and others like it—suggest that applicants who are more risk averse may be attracted to Federal employment because they perceive the jobs to be more stable, with less risk attached. This does not mean, however, that they are less capable of successfully performing on the job. Studies also find that public sector employees work just as hard as private sector employees and may be even more likely to take responsible risks while carrying out their job duties.[60]

In addition, various MSPB surveys reinforce the view that the Government is hiring talented employees with the skills necessary to carry out the agency's mission. For example:

- 75 percent of Federal employees agreed that their agency's workforce has the knowledge and skills necessary to accomplish its mission.[61]
- 80 percent of supervisors supervising Federal Career Interns indicated that the quality of their interns was above average to excellent.[62]
- Almost 90 percent of supervisors supervising employees serving a probationary period indicated that they would hire the probationer again if they had to do it over again.[63]
- 95 percent of supervisors who recently hired GS-12–15 employees from a non-Government source were satisfied with the quality of the new hires' work.[64]

It is also possible that rather than attracting applicants who are more risk-averse, it may be that the more risk-averse applicants simply prevail in the job hunt because they are more willing to endure the bureaucratic process necessary to obtain a Federal job. Therefore, the next chapter addresses the job search experiences of Federal new hires.

[60] For instance, see Sue A. Frank and Gregory B. Lewis, "Government Employees: Working Hard or Hardly Working," *The American Review of Public Administration*, vol. 34, No. 1, 2004, pp. 36-54; Evan M. Berman and Jonathan P. West, "Responsible Risk Taking," *Public Administration Review*, July/August 1998, vol. 54, No. 4, pp. 346-352.

[61] U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *Accomplishing Our Mission: Results of the Merit Principles Survey 2005*, Washington, DC, February 2007, p. 9.

[62] MSPB, B*uilding a High-Quality Workforce*, p. 16.

[63] U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *The Probationary Period: A Critical Assessment Opportunity*, Washington, DC, August 2005, p. 7.

[64] U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *In Search of Highly Skilled Professionals: A Study on the Hiring of Upper-Level Employees from Outside the Federal Government*, Washington, DC, 2007.

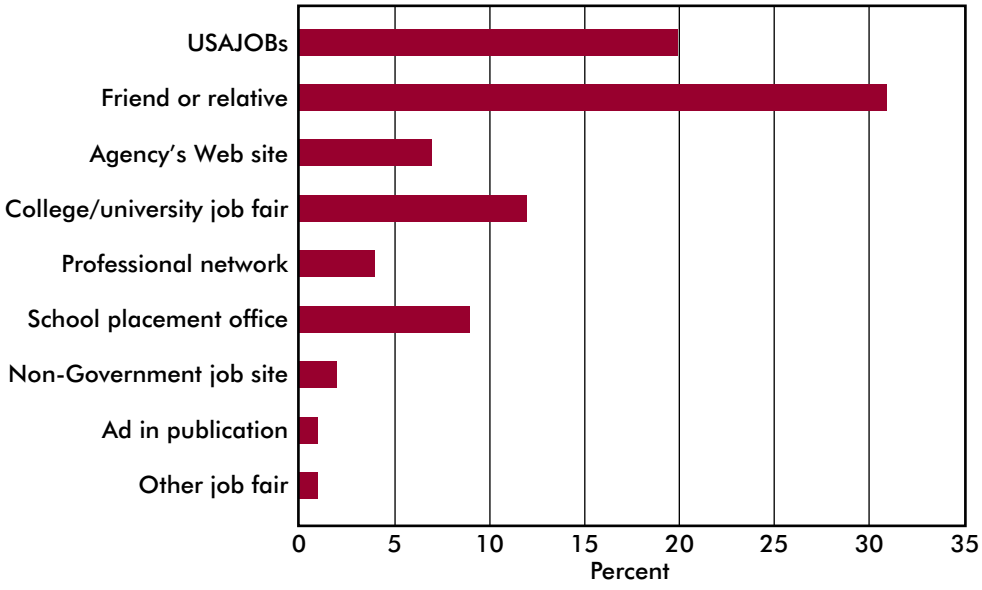
What They Did to Get the Job: The Job Hunt

The job search experience plays a key role in who is selected for Federal positions. It determines who hears about job vacancies, what steps they take to apply for jobs and how long they must wait to be hired (or not). Some of the most common complaints about the Federal hiring process are that it is excessively long, complicated and bureaucratic. To learn from their job hunt experiences and identify ways to improve the process, we asked Federal new hires what steps they took to get their job and what obstacles they faced.

Learning About Jobs

Earlier, we discussed how hiring authorities and the recruitment strategies that can be used under them may affect the age and experience of Federal new hires. Ultimately, recruitment strategies will affect who learns of job opportunities and therefore who applies. Here, we take a closer look at how new hires first learned about their Federal job to identify how specific recruitment strategies can be used more effectively.

Figure 11. How Survey Participants First Learned of Their Federal Job



Friends and Relatives

When asked how they first learned about their Federal job, new hires' top answer (31 percent) was that a friend or relative told them about it (see **Fig. 11**), particularly one who works for the Federal Government. The importance of personal contacts and referrals in recruitment is consistent with findings of past MSPB research as well as other public administration research.[65] In fact, a 2006 Booz Allen Hamilton recruitment-trends survey found that recruitment practitioners rated employee referrals as the top source not only in terms of applicant quantity but also in terms of applicant quality.[66]

Federal agencies are actually in a fairly good position to take advantage of word-of-mouth recruitment strategies. MSPB's Merit Principles Survey 2005 indicates that 76 percent of Federal employees would generally recommend the Government as a place to work, and almost as many employees (66 percent) would recommend their current agency.[67] However, when MSPB asked agencies in 2004 what their most common recruitment methods were, less than 10 percent of the surveyed organizations indicated that they commonly used word-of-mouth or employee referral-type strategies.[68]

Given the apparent low number of official referral programs in agencies, it is interesting that the largest proportion of new hires heard about their job through a friend or relative. MSPB's 2004 recruitment report found that agencies rely heavily on passive recruitment strategies to fill vacancies, such as posting vacancy announcements to USAJOBs or agency Web sites. The implication could be that a passive approach to recruitment unintentionally heightens the importance of "who-you-know" and insider contacts. This unintended result could give the perception that agency selections are, in fact, based on the "buddy system" rather than on relative ability after fair and open competition, as called for by the merit system principles.

Employee referral programs definitely have a role in recruitment, and we encourage agencies to consider how to integrate a referral strategy into their recruitment programs. After all, potential job applicants are likely to give greater weight to informal information about an employer from someone they know and trust than from a formal job announcement. Agencies, however, should ensure that referral programs, as well as any other narrow strategy, do not hinder or even replace fair and open competition. They can do this in two ways.

[65] For instance, see U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *Competing for Federal Jobs: Job Search Experiences of New Hires*, Washington, DC, February 2000, p. 7; and Gregory B. Lewis and Sue A. Frank, "Who Wants to Work for the Government," *Public Administration Review*, vol. 62, No. 4, July/August 2002, p. 398.

[66] Booz Allen Hamilton, *2006 DirectEmployers Association Recruiting Trends Survey*, February 2006, pp. 6, 8.

[67] MSPB, *Accomplishing Our Mission: Results of the Merit Principles Survey 2005*, p. 11.

[68] Note that the question provided participants a list of commonly used strategies from which to choose. Employee referrals was not on the list, but could be provided under the "other" category. It is probable that the response would be at least somewhat higher if it had been provided as part of the list.

First, do not rely on just one or two passive strategies to recruit for positions. Instead, use a balanced set of recruitment strategies that target qualified individuals from all segments of society. For instance, if an agency is hiring for a technical position, it can: post the vacancy on USAJOBs; use a referral program to encourage employees to spread the word among their personal and professional contacts; contact colleges that have respected programs in the technical area; and contact professional organizations associated with that particular specialty. Using a balanced set of strategies will not only help agencies adhere to the merit system principles, but it can also help them reach applicants who have a more diverse set of skills, competencies and potential to help accomplish their missions.

Second, use applicant assessments that are good predictors of future performance. Using assessments that can make clear and defensible distinctions among applicants will help selecting officials avoid accusations of using the "buddy system" to hire their friends.

USAJOBs

Does anyone remember what it was like trying to find out about Federal vacancies before the advent of the Internet? For the most part, an applicant had to locate and go to the closest OPM office to look through vacancy announcements, call individual agencies to find out about opportunities or pay to subscribe to periodicals that provided a list of Federal vacancies open at the time of publication.

Now, OPM sponsors USAJOBs—the official Federal job site that provides potential applicants with full vacancy announcements for all competitive service and some excepted service job openings. With 20 percent of new hires reporting that USAJOBs was how they first heard of their job, the Web site is obviously an important recruitment source. USAJOBs is particularly important to new hires 30 years of age and older, as previously discussed.

USAJOBs has many advantages. It is open 24/7, is updated in real time and is available to anyone who can access the Internet. Applicants can search job opportunities using a variety of criteria, such as job title or key word, agency, location and pay. Applicants can create a Federal resume, store it on the site and, in many instances, use that one resume to apply online for multiple Federal jobs.

However, there are still complaints about the user-friendliness of the site, and most of the problems actually fall under the purview of the agency advertising the job rather than OPM. For instance, vacancy announcements agencies develop to market the job and provide applicants the information necessary to apply for the job are often poorly written, difficult to understand and filled with jargon and unnecessary information. These are problems identified in a 2003 MSPB study that have not yet been resolved.[69]

[69] U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *Help Wanted: A Review of Federal Vacancy Announcements*, Washington, DC, April 2003; MSPB, "Help Wanted for Vacancy Announcements," *Issues of Merit*, January 2006, p. 6.

Often, the application requirements are so labor intensive that they are likely to discourage some potential applicants from applying. A recent article from a popular Federal news Web site detailed a situation in which job applicants were instructed to rate themselves on 50 questions and provide a narrative explanation justifying each of the 50 ratings.[70] This is an extreme example, but non-Federal applicants are not generally used to a process that involves the self-rating schedules and narrative statements frequently required for Federal applications.

In addition, not all Federal jobs are posted on USAJOBs because posting is only required for competitive positions. Also, applicants' resumes stored on USAJOBs often cannot be used for all Federal vacancies because some agencies use different online systems for application submission. Further, USAJOBs provides a useful feature to help applicants track the status of their application. However, when agencies do not make timely hiring decisions, the feature can actually frustrate applicants because their status does not change, reinforcing the impression that their application fell into a "black hole."

Finally, OPM needs to be careful not to oversell the availability of Federal jobs. While USAJOBs might display 20,000 open jobs at any one time, there may be only a limited number of entry-level jobs open nationwide. In addition, OPM has initiated a television advertising campaign designed to raise awareness about the unique and rewarding careers the Federal Government has to offer. The commercials, which are being aired in targeted locations throughout the country, direct interested applicants to USAJOBs to find out more about these opportunities and highlight the many technical occupations available in Government. As this study discusses, many Federal career opportunities require special skills and training, even at the entry-level. So while USAJOBs and the media campaign are tremendous opportunities to educate the public about the Federal Government, OPM needs to be careful not to create false expectations for job applicants who are not qualified for the highly skilled jobs the Federal Government seeks to fill.

OPM has made much progress in recent years in implementing and continually improving USAJOBs. The site is an invaluable resource to applicants. However, as with many areas of the hiring process, there are still improvements to be made in areas of the hiring process that affect USAJOBs, particularly in agencies' areas of responsibilities. Agencies are largely responsible for improving the content of their vacancy announcements, doing away with excessive application requirements, notifying the public of vacancies and improving the speed of hiring decisions. However, as the leader in ensuring that the Federal Government has an effective workforce, OPM is responsible for ensuring that the hiring process works in the public's interest by working with agencies to design and implement these improvements.

[70] Timothy W. Cannon, "A Bad Recipe: The Irish Burgoo Vacancy Announcement," FedSmith.com, Jan. 31, 2007.

Agency Web Sites

Given that almost a quarter of the survey participants indicated that their employment goal was to get a job with a particular agency, it is surprising that only 7 percent identified the agency Web site as the first place they learned of their job. In MSPB's 2004 recruitment study, many agencies reported that their recruitment Web sites were a commonly used recruitment method and that they were investing substantial time and resources into redesigning these sites.[71] The results of this study do not discount these efforts, but rather point to a potential need for some agencies to redirect the redesign efforts.

While some agency Web sites may not be the first place a potential applicant will go to find a Federal job, they are probably a valuable secondary source of information. Once potential applicants have identified a specific job that interests them, they are likely to go to the agency Web site for more information about the agency, including its mission, organizational culture, career advancement opportunities, workplace flexibilities and other features. Agencies should consider this role of the Web site as they design the content of their recruitment Web sites. If the site is heavy on job postings and application materials but light on what it is like to work for the agency, agencies might want to consider refocusing the message and purpose of the site.

College Fairs and Related Sources

College fairs and school placement officials proved to be a significant employment source for recently graduated new hires. Fifty-one percent of new hires who came to Government directly from school heard about their first job in this way. As discussed earlier, the Government did relatively little hiring in the late 1990s. As a result, many agencies reported losing touch with colleges and universities. It appears that agencies are increasing their campus recruitment efforts, but college students still report a lack of information regarding Federal employment.[72] Given the importance of college recruitment to Federal new hires, agencies need to rebuild these campus relationships if they have not already done so.

Applications Sent

As indicated earlier, over 50 percent of the Federal new hires surveyed were specifically looking for a position with the Federal Government. Where new hires send applications is another indication of their overall employment goal—and also a good indicator of what types of organizations the Government is competing with for talent. The survey asked new hires what employment sectors they sent applications to at the time they applied for their first Government job. The results are displayed in **Table 9**.

[71] MSPB, *Managing Federal Recruitment*, p. 10.

[72] MSPB, *Managing Federal Recruitment*, p. 37; Partnership, *Back to School*, p. 10.

Table 9. Percent of Survey Participants Sending Applications to Each Employment Sector

Sector	0 Applications	1 to 5 Applications	6 to 10 Applications	More Than 10 Applications
Federal	11%[73]	73%	8%	8%
State/Local	60%	34%	3%	3%
Nonprofit	78%	17%	3%	3%
Private	34%	37%	13%	15%

Obviously the largest portion of participants sent applications to the Government. Only applications sent to the private sector came close to rivaling this number. The fact that the largest percentage of applications was sent to the Government seems to indicate that new hires were highly motivated to obtain a Federal job.

It is interesting to note that a large majority of the participants (84 percent) reported submitting five or fewer Federal applications. Excepted service new hires were more likely to submit five or fewer (90 percent) whereas competitive service new hires tended to send more (74 percent sent 0 to 5 applications; 12 percent sent 6 to10; and 14 percent sent more than 10). This finding seems to indicate that successful Federal job seekers generally have a good idea of the job they want or have a good lead to a Government job. Therefore, they may not find it necessary to send a large number of applications throughout Government. This is particularly true for excepted service new hires—most likely because agencies recruit them more proactively through personal contacts and can hire them more quickly.

Ultimately, based on the experiences of new hires, the Government's main competition for high-quality talent is the private sector. Just over 20 percent of the survey participants sent applications to the nonprofit sector. State and local governments proved to be only slightly greater competition, with 40 percent of the participants sending applications to this sector.

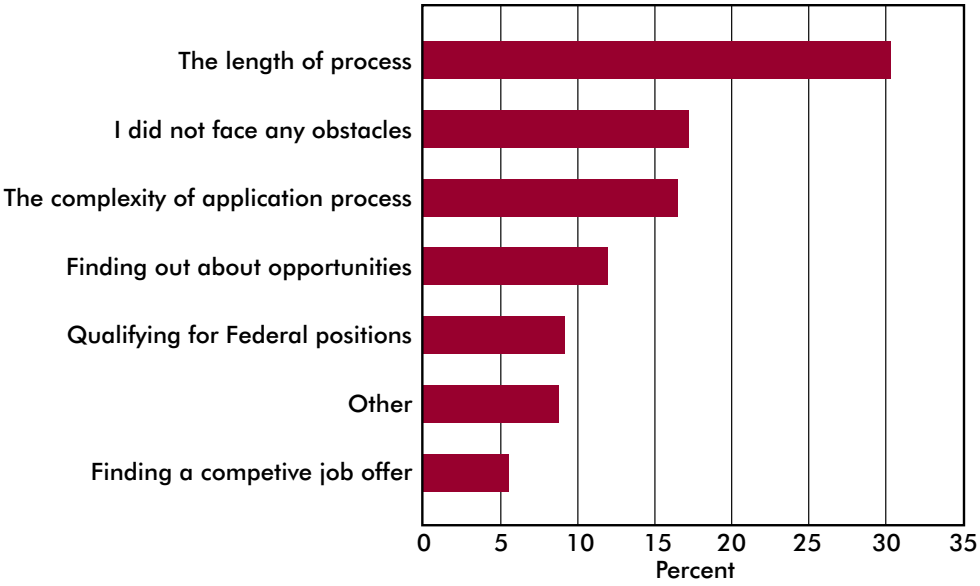
Over one-third of the survey participants sent one to five applications to the private sector, and over one-quarter sent six or more applications. And this comes from the applicants who were interested and successful in obtaining a Federal job. We can almost certainly assume that people who were unsuccessful or uninterested in the Federal job hunt were even more likely to apply to private sector organizations. While it is not a big surprise that the private sector is a key competitor, this result supports the premise that the Federal Government needs to ensure that it is competitive with the private sector—whether through pay, benefits, work flexibilities or other means—to recruit the candidates who are the best fit for the job.

[73] Eleven percent of the participants indicated that they sent zero applications to the Federal Government. It is likely that these participants thought we were asking how many applications they sent for Federal jobs other than the one they were offered. Narrative responses also indicate that at least some participants were contacted directly by the agency after they posted their resume on a job board or a professor or other source forwarded the resume. New hires may not have considered these activities to be "sending an application."

Obstacles Faced

To improve the hiring process, it is important to identify the obstacles applicants face and to try to improve in those areas. New hires can provide some insight into what works well and what does not. Therefore, we asked new hires the greatest obstacle they faced when searching for a Federal job. The answers are displayed in **Figure 12**.

Figure 12. Greatest Obstacle Survey Participants Faced in Federal Job Search



The top obstacle, no matter how the data were broken out, was the length of the hiring process. This answer is not a surprise since lack of timeliness is a common criticism of the Federal hiring system. However, when new hires reported how long it took from the time they applied for their job until it was offered to them, a significant portion of participants (38 percent) said it took 2 months or less (see **Table 10**). Earlier MSPB research found that 2 months is generally perceived by Federal new hires to be a reasonable amount of time to wait for a job offer.[74] On the other hand, almost a quarter of the participants stated that it took over 6 months from application to offer, and over one-third reported 5 months or more. In addition, while there was little difference when broken out by age, there was a noteworthy difference when broken out by hiring authority. Excepted service new hires had a higher percentage of job offers that occurred in 2 months or less (39 percent) when compared to competitive service new hires (34 percent). However, a larger percentage of excepted service new hires waited over 6 months (27 percent) than competitive service new hires (17 percent).

[74] MSPB, *Building a High-Quality Workforce*, p. 16 and MSPB, *Competing for Federal Jobs*, p. 11.

Table 10. Percent of Survey Participants Reporting Time from Application to Offer			
Time	**All**	**Competitive**	**Excepted**
<1 month	10%	9%	11%
1–2 months	27%	25%	28%
3–4 months	28%	37%	23%
5–6 months	11%	12%	11%
>6 months	23%	17%	27%

It is possible that security background investigations played a role in the untimely job offers. However, candidates usually receive at least a tentative job offer before the investigations are begun. Another explanation could be the assessment process itself. Fifty-six percent of the new hires who waited over 6 months indicated that they went through six or more assessments in the hiring process. While MSPB has long advocated a multiple hurdle approach to assessment—using a set of relatively valid assessment procedures successively to manage and narrow the field of qualified candidates—we also warn against using an excessive number of hurdles that might result in applicant attrition. What this finding suggests is that while excepted service hiring may address many of the perceived flaws in the competitive process, it is by no means a panacea and can still result in a lengthy overall hiring process.

Regardless of how the time lags came about, in a competitive job market these lags can be a severe detriment to the Federal Government. While the most determined candidates may wait 6 months or more for a job offer, agencies are likely to lose many other good candidates who are not willing or able to wait. Therefore, agencies need to evaluate their hiring processes, identify the cause of delays and make adjustments where necessary. In addition, they need to continually communicate with applicants to help them understand the process and keep them engaged while the agency makes the hiring decision.

The second most prevalent response to the question about obstacles was that new hires faced no obstacles when searching for a Federal job. Seventeen percent of survey participants gave this response. Given the amount of criticism the Federal hiring system receives in the popular press and anecdotally, this was a surprising response. It should be noted that this response was driven by those who were hired in 2 months or less. It should also be noted that the respondents to this question are the candidates who were successful in the job search. We can reasonably expect that they ran into fewer obstacles than those who were not successful.

Finally, when asked about the greatest obstacle faced when searching for a Federal job, the response new hires cited least was finding a job offer that they considered to be competitive with offers of other employers. Only about 6 percent of the participants found this to be a problem. This is contrary to much of the current

research indicating that the Government cannot compete with other sectors for the best and the brightest. At least those whom the Government hired found the job offer to be competitive.

As the research indicates, Federal new hires do not necessarily conform to typical expectations. They did not seem to have trouble finding job opportunities. They found out about their jobs largely through friends and family or the Internet. A large number of new hires sent only one to five applications to the Government, dispelling the impression that new hires have to send many applications before being hired. Because they sent the majority of their applications to the Federal sector—even though the size of the private sector is much larger—it appears, again, that they were highly motivated to obtain a Federal job. Finally, the new hires did not appear to face enormous obstacles in obtaining the Federal job. While some did have to wait a long time (6 months or more), they stuck with the process and found competitive offers.

So why are Federal new hires so different from expectations? There are many potential explanations. For instance, the Government may be attractive to, known to, sought after by, or accessible to "certain" segments of society, rather than from "all" segments of society. In other words, the Government may be attracting new hires who already have knowledge of or some relationship to Federal employment, such as having a friend or relative who works for the Government. As we have seen, many agencies use a passive approach to recruitment and selection which may unintentionally garner a workforce that looks like itself—a "Federal family" of sorts.

Another possibility is that the hiring process itself may be becoming an unintended selection factor. If an applicant can find out about the opportunities, follow the procedures and wait the required time, then they can successfully make it through the process. In other words, the process may have unintentionally become a test or an assessment in itself.

Again, this is not to say that the Government is not hiring qualified new hires. The data show that it is. But it may mean that the Government is missing out on applicants who do not buy in to the process, thereby limiting the potential diversity of the qualified applicant pool.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Federal Government hires a significant number of entry-level new hires in professional and administrative occupations every year. Because of impending retirements and the concurrent necessity to build career pipelines for these positions, it is likely that the Government will need to increase its entry-level hiring over the next 5 to 10 years. There is much skepticism in public administration circles as to whether the Federal Government is up to this task.

In particular, skeptics argue that the Government faces severe challenges in attracting high-quality applicants to apply for and fill the positions at issue. They claim the Government has become less attractive to younger workers and there does not appear to be sufficient applicant interest to build an appropriate pipeline for journey-level positions. The overall results of our study show that while some of the criticisms hold true, the Government is actually better at attracting new hires than some might think.

Conclusions

This study explored the demographics and attitudes of Federal entry-level new hires in professional and administrative occupations to determine their implications for Federal recruitment and selection practices. The results lead us to a number of conclusions.

The traditional competitive examining process is no longer the preferred process for hiring entry-level employees. Instead, a growing number of new hires are being brought into the civil service through excepted service authorities, particularly the Federal Career Intern Program. These authorities provide streamlined hiring procedures with relatively few eligibility and procedural requirements. Agencies are likely to be drawn to them because these authorities may result in faster hires and also make it easier to hire the applicants they targeted through recruitment activities. However, the survey data show that these authorities can still result in a lengthy overall hiring process. In addition, these authorities can make it easier to unnecessarily narrow the applicant pool, potentially short-circuiting fair and open competition.

Federal entry-level new hires are not the young, inexperienced, recent college graduates many expect. On average, Federal entry-level new hires in professional and administrative positions are 33 years old. The largest segment of our survey participants had 1 to 5 years of prior full-time work experience. The fact that they are older and more experienced may be attributed to a number of factors. In particular, there appear to be some systematic barriers imposed by agency recruitment and assessment practices that favor older applicants who have more experience over younger applicants who may have more potential.

Federal job requirements, such as minimum education and individual occupational requirements for particular jobs, also favor older, more experienced applicants without considering future potential. This is not to suggest that agencies should in turn favor younger applicants. Rather, they should use recruitment and assessment practices designed to identify the best candidate for the job based on relative ability, regardless of age and years of experience.

The Federal Government offers what new hires, of all ages, want. Entry-level new hires had rather favorable impressions of Federal employment when they applied for their job and felt Federal employment offered them what they were looking for in a job and employer. In addition, there is not a substantial difference between generations in terms of the employment factors they seek. Particularly, younger new hires seek the same type of job security older new hires seek, and a significant number plan to stay with the Government until they retire (45 percent of new hires under the age of 30 and 36 percent of new hires who came to Government from school).

New hires face fewer obstacles than expected in the hiring process and were fairly determined to obtain a Federal job. Perceived barriers to hiring new Federal employees include the lengthy, complicated hiring process, applicants' ignorance of job opportunities and negative perceptions of the Federal Government. Our data show these perceptions are not necessarily held by new hires. Though timeliness was the largest obstacle cited, a large segment of new hires were hired relatively quickly (38 percent in 2 months or less). They seemed to have a fair amount of awareness about the Federal Government at the time they applied. For instance, they had friends or relatives who shared job prospects with them, or they knew enough about the Government to use USAJOBs as a job search tool. Finally, many new hires were particularly determined to get a job with the Federal Government. A relatively large number of new hires sent no applications to other employment sectors, and some were willing to wait a long time (23 percent waited more than 6 months) for a job offer.

Recommendations

The results of this study demonstrate that the Federal Government can more ably compete for entry-level new hires than some of the contemporary research suggests. Agencies can use the information gleaned from Federal new hires to develop improved recruitment, marketing and assessment strategies. Therefore, MSPB makes the following recommendations to help agencies begin this process.

Agencies should:

Use more predictive applicant assessment tools. The merit system principles state that employee selection should be based on relative ability, knowledge and skills. In other words, the person(s) most able to perform well in the job should be hired. High quality assessment tools are needed to make the distinctions between those who will excel at the job and those who will not. This study, as well as other MSPB research, suggests that agencies are not using high quality assessment tools. Agencies should invest the resources necessary to develop and administer assessments that have a greater ability to predict future job performance and that make finer distinctions among candidates' skills, abilities and potential than are made using typical training and experience assessments. Employing better assessments will not only ensure better adherence to the merit principles, it will also result in a higher quality workforce.

Use a balanced set of recruitment strategies that promote fair and open competition. Applicants from different demographic groups have different ways of finding out about job vacancies, and they have different knowledge levels regarding how to get a Federal job. Therefore, agencies should use a variety of recruitment sources to reach applicants from all segments of society. If agencies rely solely on posting vacancies on USAJOBs or attending college job fairs to reach applicants, they will unnecessarily narrow the applicant pool. Conducting a proper job analysis and identifying the appropriate minimum qualifications will help agencies avoid attracting unqualified applicants, and using high-quality assessments will help them manage the existing applicant pool. Also, agencies should not forget the value of agency employees in helping attract good candidates and should consider implementing an employee referral program as part of their recruitment plans.

However, there are times when it is necessary to target recruitment strategies to particular applicant pools. This study points out that a number of jobs for which the Government hires require candidates to have specific education, skills or experience. When agencies target recruitment activities to the appropriate sources for their requirements, they should clearly communicate the necessary qualifications so as not to create unrealistic expectations for applicants who will not qualify for these positions.

Market what is important. The results of this study indicate that the Government has much to offer applicants that applicants are seeking in a job, including job security, good benefits and the ability to make a difference with the work. In addition, the Government offers nontraditional benefits and alternative work place benefits that are becoming increasingly important to applicants, such as telework, alternative work schedules and tuition reimbursement. Agencies should evaluate how and where they can maximize the use of these benefits and flexibilities—in line with the organization's mission—and then market these job attractors to entice high-quality applicants to apply. In addition, agencies should ensure that recruitment materials, especially vacancy announcements, are clear, professional and represent the organization well.

Evaluate the agency hiring process to ensure there are no unnecessary obstacles. Agencies' internal hiring practices often create additional, unnecessary barriers that can add to the time it takes to hire. Lack of timeliness was one of most cited obstacles to entry-level hiring. Therefore, agencies should evaluate their hiring process to determine whether there are unnecessary steps that add to the time it takes to hire and then make improvements where possible. Because of some pre-appointment requirements, agencies cannot always ensure a fast process. Therefore, they should develop a good system for communicating with employees to explain the status of their applications. Keeping applicants engaged may help avoid some of the inevitable applicant attrition.

Avoid stereotyping applicants based on generational assumptions. This study indicates that there are similarities in what the different generations want in a job—though there may be different levels of importance for workers of different generations. However, a recent survey conducted by Sirota Survey Intelligence found that 56 percent of HR professionals think there are "major differences" in what employees from different generations want from their jobs.[75] Biases could lead HR staff and selecting officials to treat employees differently based on stereotypes that are not accurate. Therefore, those involved in the hiring process should treat applicants and employees as individuals and recognize that they may have different needs, regardless of their generational category.

OPM should:

Work with agencies to develop a Governmentwide framework for Federal hiring reform that simplifies hiring procedures by streamlining and consolidating appointing authorities while protecting merit-based hiring. Agencies continue to use hiring authorities for entry-level hires that purport to streamline the existing competitive examining process. For a number of years, agencies used the Outstanding Scholar Program as the primary vehicle for entry-level hiring and now it is the Federal Career Intern Program. These authorities, in some cases, help agencies by shortening the time it takes to hire

[75] Jessica Marquez, "HR's Generation Generalizations," *News in Brief*, workforce.com, October 18, 2005.

and making it easier to reach applicants they have targeted through recruitment. However, used inappropriately, these same authorities can also undermine fair and open competition by narrowing the applicant pool and limiting selection based on relative ability by permitting reliance on inadequate assessment practices. Agencies' opting out of competitive examining on such a large scale indicates that there are fundamental problems with the competitive process.

OPM should work with agencies to identify how to systematically address flaws in the competitive process rather than rely on short-term stop gaps that can have their own negative consequences. For instance, the Government Accountability Office and the National Commission on the Public Service held a forum in 2004 to discuss how to address human capital reform. They brought together stakeholders from Government, academia, professional organizations and unions to discuss establishing a Governmentwide framework to guide reform while still providing enough flexibility for agencies to address their own specific issues. OPM could sponsor a similar activity that focuses primarily on the Federal hiring system.[76]

Work with agencies to develop better assessment tools. In the mid-1990s, OPM delegated agencies the responsibility to assess applicants, but agencies did not receive supporting resources for this responsibility. While OPM provides assessment assistance to agencies on a reimbursable basis, many agencies do not have the necessary resources to pay for OPM's services or to develop their own assessment tools. OPM should present Congress with the business case to receive appropriated funds to centrally develop and validate assessment tools that agencies could acquire at little or no cost, particularly for Governmentwide and mission-critical occupations.

Implementing these recommendations should help agencies ensure that they are hiring qualified applicants from all segments of society after fair and open competition and treating applicants fairly and equitably, as prescribed by the merit system principles.

[76] U.S. Government Accountability Office and the National Commission on the Public Service Implementation Initiative, "Highlights of a Forum," *Human Capital: Principles, Criteria, and Processes for Governmentwide Federal Human Capital Reform*, GAO-05-69SP, Washington, DC, December 2004.

Appendix: Entry-Level Survey

January 2006

Dear Federal Employee:

The U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) is an independent Federal agency that monitors and safeguards merit in the Federal civil service in part through Government-wide studies and reviews. Findings and recommendations from our periodic studies and reviews are reported to the President and Congress and made available to other Federal officials and employees.

We are currently conducting a study to assess how Federal agencies can better attract and select qualified applicants for career-entry opportunities. You are one of a relatively small sample of new Federal employees that we selected to participate in this study. Attached is a questionnaire asking about why you chose to work for the Federal Government and about your experiences applying for your first Federal job. The survey is brief and should take about 10 minutes to complete. Your responses to the questions will be kept confidential and reported only in the aggregate with other participants' responses. We will use the information you provide to develop recommendations to help agencies improve their techniques for attracting high-quality job applicants. It is, therefore, very important that you complete and return the questionnaire.

Please return your completed questionnaire in the envelope provided, or FAX it to (202) 653-7211, within 5 days after you receive it. If you wish to receive a copy of the report based on this study, please subscribe to our list-server at www.mspb.gov/studies/ or write to the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, ATTN: OPE, Washington, DC 20419.

If you have any questions about this questionnaire or the study, please call Ms. Laura Shugrue at (202) 653-6772, ext. 1124 or send an e-mail message to laura.shugrue@mspb.gov. Thank you very much for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Steve Nelson

Steve Nelson
Director, Policy and Evaluation

NEW EMPLOYEE SURVEY
U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board

Instructions: Please base your responses on your knowledge and experiences applying for the Federal position for which you were recently hired. Please write or mark your responses in the space provided and return the completed survey in the envelope provided or FAX it to (202) 653-7211.

1. Approximately how many years of full-time work experience did you have before joining the Federal Government?

_____

2. Which of the following best describes what you were doing at the time you applied for your Federal job? (Check only one)

- ○ Attending school
- ○ Serving in the military/Coast Guard
- ○ Working for a Federal contractor
- ○ Working for a private company (not a Federal contractor)
- ○ Working for a non-profit organization
- ○ Working for a school, college, or university
- ○ Working for a state or local government
- ○ Working for myself
- ○ Not employed
- ○ Other _____

3. At the time you applied for your Federal job, approximately how many applications did you send to each of the following employment sectors?

	None	1-5	6-10	Over 10
Federal Government	○	○	○	○
State/local government	○	○	○	○
Non-profit sector	○	○	○	○
Private sector	○	○	○	○
Other	○	○	○	○

4. At the time that you applied for your Federal job, which of the following best describes your employment goal?

- ○ To get a job with a specific Federal agency
- ○ To get a job with the Federal Government
- ○ To get a public service-oriented job
- ○ To get a job in a particular occupation
- ○ To get a job

5. How did you <u>first</u> learn about your Federal job?

- ○ From the USAJOBS Web site
- ○ From the agency's Web site
- ○ From a friend or relative
- ○ From an ad in a newspaper, journal, or magazine
- ○ From a non-government Internet job site
- ○ From a school placement office or official
- ○ At a college/university job fair
- ○ At a job fair not affiliated with a college or university
- ○ From a professional network/association
- ○ Other_____

6. About how long did it take from the time you applied for your current job until it was offered to you?

- ○ Less than 1 month
- ○ 1 - 2 months
- ○ 3 - 4 months
- ○ 5 - 6 months
- ○ More than 6 months
- ○ Don't remember

Survey Continues on the Back of this Page ☞

7. Which of the following steps did you complete during the application process for your Federal job? (Check all that apply)

- ○ Submitted an online resume/application
- ○ Submitted a paper resume/application
- ○ Submitted a narrative statement addressing specific qualifications
- ○ Submitted my educational transcripts
- ○ Answered a lengthy questionnaire that contained questions concerning my work, education, and personal history
- ○ Took a written, multiple-choice examination
- ○ Submitted a writing sample
- ○ Completed an exercise that simulated the work I would be doing in the job
- ○ Provided references that were checked by my employer
- ○ Went through at least one job interview
- ○ None of the above

8. What was the *greatest* obstacle you faced when searching for a Federal job?

- ○ Finding out about job opportunities
- ○ The complexity of the application process
- ○ Qualifying for Federal positions
- ○ The length of the hiring process
- ○ Finding a job offer that was competitive with other employers
- ○ I did not face any obstacles
- ○ Other_____

9. When you joined the Federal workforce, which of the following best describes how long you expected to work in the Federal Government?

- ○ Less than 3 years
- ○ 3 - 5 years
- ○ Over 5 years
- ○ Until I retire
- ○ I had no specific expectations

10. During the next 5 - 10 years, how likely is it that you will leave Federal employment to:

	Very Likely	Somewhat Likely	Somewhat Unlikely	Very Unlikely	Don't Know
Work in the private sector?	○	○	○	○	○
Work in the nonprofit sector?	○	○	○	○	○
Work for a state or local government?	○	○	○	○	○

11. Ultimately, which of the following was the *single most important* factor that influenced your decision to work for the Federal Government? (Check only one)

- ○ Pay
- ○ Benefits
- ○ Job security
- ○ Job site locations
- ○ Diversity of assignments
- ○ Opportunities for training
- ○ Opportunity to advance
- ○ Challenging and interesting work
- ○ Making a difference with my work
- ○ Positive work environment
- ○ Reputation of the employer
- ○ Ability to have a life outside of work
- ○ Ability to address a new family situation (e.g., child, marital change, health change)
- ○ Other _____

Survey Continues on the Next Page ☞

12. At the time you applied for your Federal job, did you consider the following factors to be strengths or weaknesses of Federal employment?

	Major Strength	Moderate Strength	Moderate Weakness	Major Weakness	Don't Know
Pay	○	○	○	○	○
Benefits	○	○	○	○	○
Job security	○	○	○	○	○
Job site locations	○	○	○	○	○
Diversity of assignments	○	○	○	○	○
Opportunities for training	○	○	○	○	○
Opportunity to advance	○	○	○	○	○
Challenging and interesting work	○	○	○	○	○
Making a difference with my work	○	○	○	○	○
Positive work environment	○	○	○	○	○
Reputation of the employer	○	○	○	○	○
Ability to have a life outside of work	○	○	○	○	○
Ability to address a new family situation (e.g., child, marital change, health change)	○	○	○	○	○

13. How important was the availability of each of the following to you when you were considering job offers?

	Very Important	Important	Neither Important/ Unimportant	Unimportant	Very Unimportant
Structured training/development program (e.g., internship)	○	○	○	○	○
Portable, 401K-type retirement plan	○	○	○	○	○
Fixed pension retirement plan	○	○	○	○	○
Health insurance	○	○	○	○	○
Yearly salary increases	○	○	○	○	○
Vacation time	○	○	○	○	○
Sick leave	○	○	○	○	○
Tuition reimbursement	○	○	○	○	○
Flexible or alternative work schedules	○	○	○	○	○
Opportunity to work at alternate work sites (i.e., telecommuting)	○	○	○	○	○
Childcare subsidies	○	○	○	○	○
Onsite or nearby childcare facilities	○	○	○	○	○
Elder care resource and referral services	○	○	○	○	○

Survey Continues on the Back of this Page ☞

The following demographics information will not be used to personally identify you. We will combine your responses with other participant responses to compare different demographic groupings.

14. How long have you been working for the Federal Government?

- ○ Less than 1 year
- ○ 1 - 2 years
- ○ Over 2 years

15. What was your age when you began working for the Federal Government?

_____

16. At what grade level were you first appointed?

- ○ GS-05 (or equivalent)
- ○ GS-07 (or equivalent)
- ○ GS-09 (or equivalent)
- ○ Don't know/none of the above

17. Please indicate the job series and position title of your first Federal job (this is listed on your pay statement).

_____

18. Do you work at your agency's headquarters office (typically in Washington, DC) or in a field location?

- ○ Headquarters
- ○ Field

19. What is your highest education degree completed to date?

- ○ High school diploma, GED, or equivalent
- ○ Associate's degree
- ○ Bachelor's degree
- ○ Master's degree
- ○ Professional degree (e.g., law degree)
- ○ Doctorate or equivalent
- ○ None of the above

20. How old were you when you completed your highest education degree?

_____

21. What race or ethnic category do you consider yourself to be? (Mark all that apply)

- ○ American Indian/Alaskan Native
- ○ Asian
- ○ Black/African American
- ○ Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
- ○ White
- ○ Hispanic or Latino

22. In your own words, please briefly describe why you chose to work for the Federal Government at this point in your life/career.

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Thank you for participating in this survey!

Please return it in the self-addressed postage-paid envelope provided or FAX it to (202) 653-7211.

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