

Navigating USAJOBS to Land a Federal Role

Assessing Federal Workforce Policies and Trends to Guide
Younger Generations in Securing Federal Employment

Swette Center for Sustainable Food Systems, Arizona State University

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Authors

Stephanie Lip

Graduate Student

Swette Center for Sustainable Food Systems

Arizona State University

Abigail Martone-Richards

Graduate Student

Swette Center for Sustainable Food Systems

Arizona State University

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Special thanks to:

Junell L. Norris

Human Resources Specialist
National Park Service

Dr. Sara El-Sayed

Assistant Research Professor
Swette Center for Sustainable Food Systems
Arizona State University

Dr. Kathleen A. Merrigan

Executive Director
Swette Center for Sustainable Food Systems
Arizona State University

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Executive Summary

The goal of this report is to present an overview of the federal workforce and the opportunities that exist for younger generations to be employed by the federal government. We explored what is preventing younger generations from seeking and securing federal employment and shed light on the benefits, value, and opportunities of federal jobs for the younger generation.

The report provides a better understanding of how and what policies, for better or worse, influence federal recruitment and hiring processes. We examined the 20-year history and evolution of the federal job portal, USAJOBS, to understand what information is critical to provide an applicant to successfully complete and submit an application for a federal job. We also reviewed the role of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM), and its responsibility to provide agencies guidance and support in implementing government orders and policies.

With research, data, and interview insights, we developed a tangible guide for young job seekers to use to navigate USAJOBS. This guide provides applicable tips gathered from experiences of first-hand users and federal human resources specialists to help prospective applicants decipher federal job announcements and to strategically and completely prepare their applications and resumes to secure federal employment.

Based on these findings, we encourage younger generations, including students and recent graduates, to seek federal jobs not only because of the numerous employment benefits, but because of the value and impact younger generations will have in being a federal employee.

Introduction

The federal government is the largest employer in the United States with an estimated 2.1 million civilian employees. With an average of 23,023 jobs open per day (USAJOBS, n.d.-a), there are opportunities for employment, particularly for younger generations such as Millennials and Generation Z, which include those who are currently younger than 30 years old. However, a recent study surveying 1,000 post-secondary students reported that 46 percent said they would not consider a job in the federal government (Qualtrics, 2022). This statistic is further solidified in the current make-up of the United States labor force where of the 10 percent of Generation Z currently employed, only 2 percent make up the federal workforce (Kang, 2022). The fact that there are fewer employees below the age of 30 in the federal government is not unheard of. In 2009 the number of federal employees younger than 30 made up just 11.4 percent of the federal workforce. Four years later, that count dropped to only 8.5 percent (Neal, 2014). Today the federal government still struggles to recruit and retain young people in federal roles. This presents a national concern when it is estimated that nearly 30 percent of the federal workforce will be eligible for retirement, leaving hundreds of thousands of positions without successors (Hyman, et. al., 2023).

A negative perception of the government and the reputation of having a lengthy hiring process are reasons why younger generations are not seeking employment in the federal workforce. This perception may be attributed to a lack of trust by younger people in the government. According to a 2023 study by the Partnership of Public Service, only 30 percent of people between the ages of 18 and 34 trust our federal government (Shutava, 2023). And when people do not trust their government, they are less likely to participate in civic engagement, including civil service (Stier & Freedman, 2022). From a logistics perspective, the federal hiring process is tedious, long, and detracts quality candidates from following through with their application process on USAJOBS. On average, it takes over 90 days to complete the hiring process which is double the time as the private sector. Applicants have reported in the past that they did not know where they stood in their hiring process and during the process of waiting, they received job offers in the private sector instead (Davidson, 2016).

Although there are barriers that are turning younger generations away from the federal workforce, there are also a number of benefits to consider. Federal employment offers job security and stability, competitive healthcare benefits, retirement plans and annuity, flexible work arrangements, generous paid leave and holiday policies, and student loan forgiveness plans, to name a few (Go Government, n.d.-b.). Adding intangible value, federal employment gives younger generations a chance to make a difference. This value is of importance as we develop this report for students and recent graduates to

utilize to secure federal employment in related agencies including but not limited to, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). There is more of an opportunity to change the system when you are a part of the system. Deloitte reported that 54 percent of young adults choose jobs based on whether or not they would be able to make a “meaningful contribution to society” (Datar et al., 2022). A study on Generation Z and their federal employment retention showed that they view government service as a way to contribute to the good of the public (Shutava, 2023).

To tie together the challenges and benefits and to help the younger generation weave through the complexities of federal employment, we will provide a compilation of “tips and tricks” to navigating the end to end process of landing a federal job.

Methodology

Research Methods

In order to complete this study, the research team used three primary methods of gathering data: interviews with qualified participants, a literature review of related topics and desk research to support our analysis and findings. The team also completed an exercise to aggregate and analyze the interview data to compare and contrast content, gather important information, and find common themes. Below is a summary of these three research methods.

Interviews

After receiving exemption from the Arizona State University Institutional Review Board (Appendix A), the research team conducted interviews with qualified study participants. The team determined that the most qualified study participants would fall into four main categories: 1) employees at the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) who worked with USAJOBS, 2) Human Resources experts (recruiting and classification specialists) who worked at federal agencies, 3) people who used USAJOBS as applicants and/or had pursued employment in the public sector and 4) leaders/experts who had experience helping others gain federal employment. The team searched for study participants primarily using the professional networking platform, LinkedIn, as well as the websites of various agencies and organizations.

The interviews were held over Zoom and typically lasted 60 minutes. All but one interviewee signed a consent form, indicating they were comfortable with being recorded, and selected how they would like to be identified if information was used in the paper. Most interviews had both members of the research team with one leading the interview and the other taking notes. The participants had expertise across a wide range of topics, including federal hiring processes, using USAJOBS, job classification, federal recruiting, workforce planning, interviewing for federal jobs, building federal resumes and the benefits and challenges of working for a federal agency.

Literature Review

In addition to the interviews, the team conducted a traditional literature review after searching for published articles through Elsevier, ProQuest, and the Arizona State University Library. The topics for which the team searched were about the history and trends of the general and federal workforces, the policies that influence federal recruiting and hiring processes, and the functionality and user feedback of USAJOBS. The team wanted to cover the evolution of USAJOBS, since the establishment of its digital platform in 1996. The history of the federal workforce and the policies that

influence it were also explored to better inform and give understanding to the reader about why things may be the way they are in federal hiring and recruitment processes. Keywords and phrases searched included “federal workforce,” “USAJOBS,” “federal job,” “benefits federal work,” “federal policy hiring,” “office of personnel,” and “federal hiring.” The team was more successful in finding federal journal articles and was challenged in finding many related peer-reviewed articles.

Desk Research

The last research method used was desk research to supplement the report and build the guide on navigating USAJOBS. The website for the Office of Personnel (OPM), the agency that implements federal hiring policies and oversees USAJOBS, was used often to explore the policies that have shaped hiring and recruiting for federal employment and to confirm common terminology was defined and properly used. Federal reports from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) and U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) presented analyses and recommendations for the government to address human capital management challenges. The team also used survey and statistical information from the Bureau of Labor, Pew Research Center, Deloitte, Next100, GenForward, and the Partnership for Public Service to better understand the demographics of the federal workforce as well as public perception of the government.

The team also reviewed existing resources that provide assistance to people using USAJOBS and/or seeking federal employment. Some of these resources were not up to date but still provided a sense of how the process has evolved over time. The team also researched several organizations that focused on recruiting for federal roles, whether in an official capacity or not. One example is the organization, Go Government, a nonprofit whose mission is to “build a better government and a stronger democracy” by “inspiring a new generation to serve” (Go Government, n.d.-a.). The team reached out to several employees at GoGovernment but, unfortunately, were not able to speak with them regarding this project.

Lastly, the USAJOBS platform was utilized extensively throughout this study. In order to become proficient users, the team created their own accounts on USAJOBS to gain first-hand experiences of using the platform to ensure the application steps were accurate. As much as possible, they navigated the platform through the steps of the typical application process to better understand the platform’s functionality and overall user experience.

Qualitative Data Analysis

After conducting interviews, the research team built an excel spreadsheet to compare and contrast the content of each interview and identify common themes. The interview

participants shared enthusiasm for public service and valued the stability and benefits of working for an agency.

The participants in this group spoke about their experience navigating the hiring process and using USAJOBS, using words like “technical,” “process,” and “assistance.” For those working in public service, they provided insight into why they were interested in civil service (“helping” and “important”) and, if applicable, their experience as civil servants (“opportunities,” “interesting,” and “growth”). Overall, while many felt that the hiring process could be lengthy and confusing, they expressed satisfaction with the work they were doing.

Quantitative Data Analysis

In addition to the qualitative analysis, the team analyzed the interview data from a quantitative perspective. In total, the team reached out to 58 individuals and scheduled **11 interviews**, totaling a 19 percent response rate (see Appendix B for a list of all study participants). Figure 3 shows the number of interviewees by the categories identified above.

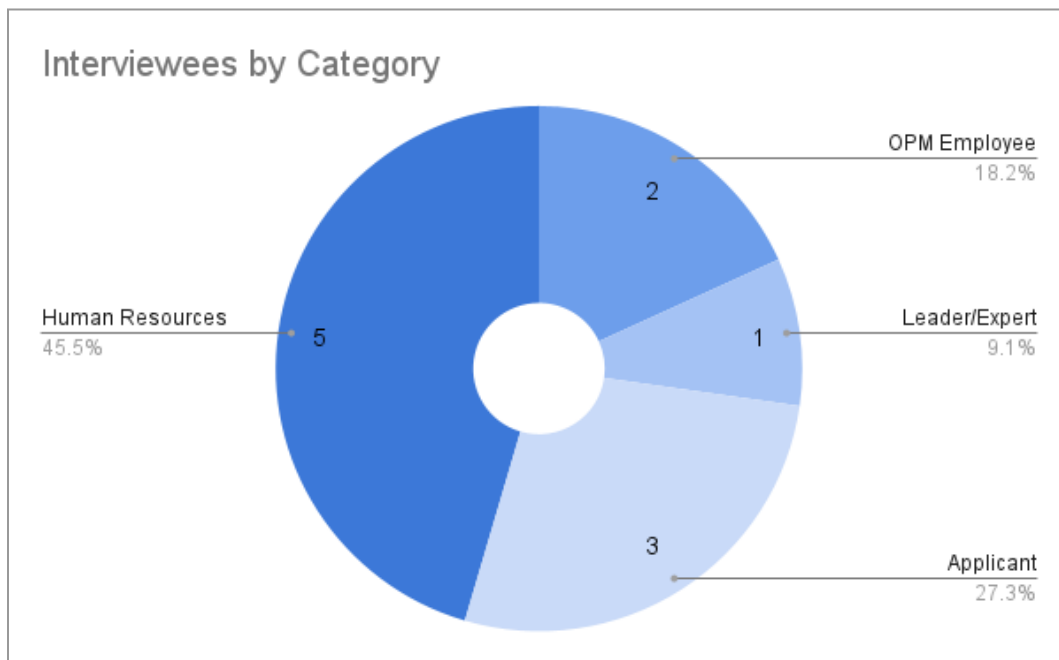


Figure 3: Interviewees by category

The team also compiled some general information about the participants, summarized below:

- Of the 11 total participants, 8 currently work for a federal agency, 1 works for a state agency, 1 formerly worked for a federal agency but as a contractor, and 1 had never worked for a federal agency.
- Of the 11 participants, 8 of them (73 percent) were women and 3 were male. Of the 8 currently working for federal agencies, 75 percent were women and 25 percent were male. This contrasts the overall gender makeup of the federal workforce, where 57 percent of employees are male and 43 percent are female (Partnership for Public Service, 2019).
- Of the 9 participants who have experience working for a federal agency, 50 percent worked in public service for less than 10 years, 40 percent have worked between 10-20 years and 1 has served for more than 30 years. The average tenure of a federal employee is 7.5 years (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022).
- Of the 10 participants who worked in federal roles, 50 percent worked at more than one agency.
- Of the 11 participants, 2 of them were veterans (20 percent of the federal participants). Today, veterans make up approximately 33 percent of the federal workforce (Partnership for Public Service, 2019).

Literature Review

Overview & Background of USAJOBS

USAJOBS, the official job board of the United States federal government, was established in 1996 and is designed to connect prospective applicants with employment opportunities across various government agencies. It serves as a centralized platform for agencies to list job announcements and for individuals to seek federal employment they may be eligible for. There are over 500 federal agencies listed on USAJOBS encompassing numerous sectors, including education, healthcare, defense, nutrition, agriculture, law enforcement, and more (Weisner, 2023). These agencies play a crucial role in shaping national policies, implementing programs, and ensuring the smooth functioning of the country.

The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) serves as the main human resources agency and personnel policy manager for the federal government, working in several

OPM's Vision Statement:

"Powering the Federal Government to be a model employer through innovative solutions and a dynamic, inclusive workforce."

categories, such as benefits, vetting, and human capital management. The agency works to provide quality health insurance, dental and vision benefits, and life insurance to federal employees. It is responsible for the federal retirement program which covers over 2 million active employees. The vetting process at OPM is thorough and ensures individuals are suitable and fit for federal employment, which is especially important for sensitive positions that give

access to classified information (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, n.d.-o). Under human capital management, OPM provides policy direction that supports the current needs of federal agencies as well as technical guidance in the implementation of Administration priorities and goals. OPM also manages products and services designed to understand human capital priorities in agencies to attract and build a quality public workforce. An example of this service is USAJOBS, which is the official job board of the federal government where agencies can meet their legal obligations of providing public notice of employment information and opportunities to federal employees and citizens. Usability of and user feedback on USAJOBS is collected and evaluated by OPM (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, n.d.-a).

Prior to 1996, the hiring process was done by paper, and job announcements were posted on bulletin boards in federal buildings, as well as various publications. Over the years, USAJOBS evolved into a web-based job board, expanding its reach to applicants. Following President Obama's 2010 memorandum of "Improving the Federal

Recruitment and Hiring Process,” the platform underwent “a major facelift” (USAJOBS, n.d.-h). This hiring reform directed federal agencies to change recruitment and hiring practices and allowed applicants to more easily apply by submitting resumes, while eliminating “essay-style” response question prompts (Executive Office of the President, 2010). Recognized as USAJOBS 2.0, the revamped website presented an updated homepage where the job search feature was enhanced, the resume builder tool was improved upon, and the “Information Center” was added to serve as an easy-to-access resource for applicants (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2010a).

To carry out President Obama’s 2012 Digital Government Strategy, which strived to ensure that the government seized the opportunities of the digital world and provided access to federal workforce information “anywhere and anytime,” OPM released a mobile application for USAJOBS for Android and improved its existing application for iOS (Federal Trade Commission, 2013). The app allowed users to save job listings, receive updates on submitted applications, and to share findings at USAJOBS across social media platforms. This was a major effort of OPM to transform its services and align them with the pace of 21st century technological advancements (Office of Personnel Management, 2013). Additional updates supported agencies in recruitment such as the pilot of the “Agency Talent Portal,” a strategic tool that includes resume mining and interactive dashboards for agencies to recruit talent while quantifying the effectiveness of recruitment initiatives (Brantley, 2016). In 2014, “The Lab at OPM” launched to better understand the user experience and conduct qualitative research to leverage people-centered design. The Lab conducts research to identify user “pain points” and takes people’s ways of thinking and needs into consideration (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, n.d.-l). Over the next couple of years, the team at USAJOBS and The Lab worked closely to gather and utilize research from interviews with users, applicants, and HR specialists to understand where the gaps were to develop frameworks for future designs. It was learned that applicants did not finish their applications or sometimes submitted incomplete applications on USAJOBS (Ogrysko, 2016). With that in mind, six design pillars (as shown in Figure 4) were established to serve as the foundation for future designs to better serve the needs of its range of users.

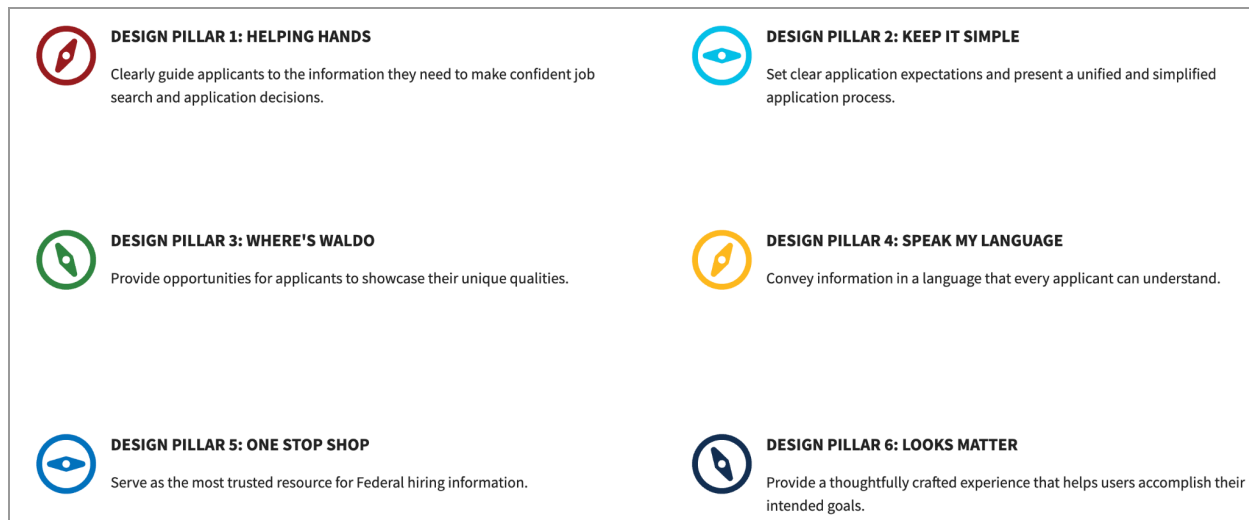


Figure 4: USAJOBS Design Pillars (USAJOBS, n.d.-b)

On its 20th anniversary in 2016, USAJOBS released the first iteration influenced by these six design pillars, showcasing major improvements on its job application component. The mobile-friendly website replaced the existing mobile apps and produced a new interface and user experience designed to mirror non-federal job sites (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2016a). Additionally, USAJOBS added a designated “Help Center,” featured a new profile creation experience, and revised its step-by-step application process (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2016c). The updated website included an application auto-save function, a status tracker to help applicants follow their progress from start to finish, and a verification prompt prior to submission to ensure applications were complete and accurate. Since the redesign, OPM created “Hiring Paths” to more easily categorize who is eligible to apply for specific federal jobs, so that job seekers could efficiently search for employment. According to a 2020 study conducted by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), OPM continued making improvements to USAJOBS over the years by improving the website’s security through the implementation of a new login process, updating search filters to auto-suggest terms, and revising the template for job announcements, making it simpler for applicants to understand, especially if they are reading through multiple job descriptions from different agencies (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2020).

Although these updates have been made to improve the user experience on USAJOBS, the overall federal hiring process continues to be an impeding factor to building up the federal workforce with new talent. As new policies are implemented, hiring officials are constantly pivoting and revising strategies to effectively and efficiently recruit and onboard qualified candidates. Recognizing these challenges, OPM aimed to define the

understanding of the “end to end hiring process” which involved the agency itself, other federal agencies, and job applicants (Brantley, 2016).

The Role of Policy in Federal Recruiting & Hiring Processes

In 2001, GAO named “strategic human capital management” as a government-wide high risk area and over two decades later, this designation remains. Shortfalls in federal workforce planning and training lead to skill-gaps in agencies which impede the government from effectively serving the public (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2023). To better identify and address the gaps in federal agencies, it is important to understand what role OPM plays in an agency’s workforce planning.

Policy is significant in shaping federal hiring practices and processes, with OPM spearheading the implementation of these federal policies on behalf of the Administration. The responsibility to oversee the federal personnel system involves the assessment of compliance with merit system principles and its related laws, rules, regulations, and Executive Orders (EO). This oversight began 140 years ago after the Civil Service Act of 1883 (also known as the Pendleton Act) was passed. To see an overview timeline of these policies and laws over the years, see Appendix C. The Civil Service Act established the Civil Service Commission and formed the basis of the “merit system” still used today (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, n.d.-e). This “open, fair, honest, and impartial” way of competitively examining individuals replaced the antiquated “spoils system” which was based on political loyalties. Most federal jobs are considered part of this “competitive service” where individuals go through a competitive hiring process. During the Civil Service Act, it was also recognized that certain positions should not be part of the merit system, thus creating the first exceptions to competitive service. These positions are known as “excepted service” positions and are appointed under Schedule A and Schedule B authorities. Over time, Schedule C authority was created and used for political appointee positions. These three schedules are still used today (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 2015).

In 1978, the Civil Service Reform Act dissolved the Civil Service Commission, thereby distributing its functions to three agencies: 1) the Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) which manages merit system principles (MSPs) to ensure a “competent, honest, and productive workforce,” 2) the Office of Special Counsel (OSC) which manages prohibited personnel practices (PPPs) including protecting whistleblowers, and 3) the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) which implements rules to oversee all federal workforce management (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 2020). Specifically, OPM’s legal authority is under Title 5 of the U.S. Code and its regulations for enforcement and management of corrective action with agencies is under Title 5 of

the Code of Federal Regulations (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, n.d.-e). See Table 1 below for additional details.

Table 1: Legal Authorities of the OPM. Source: U.S. Office of Personnel Management, n.d.-e.

5 U.S.C. 1104(b)(2)	
Oversight	"The Office shall establish and maintain an oversight program to ensure that activities under any authority delegated under subsection (a) of this section are in accordance with the merit system principles and the standards under paragraph (1) of this subsection."
5 CFR 5.2(b)	
Compliance Assessment	"Evaluating the effectiveness of (1) Personnel policies, programs, and operations of Executive agencies and other Federal agencies subject to the jurisdiction of the Office, including their effectiveness with regard to merit selection and employee development; (2) agency compliance with and enforcement of applicable laws rules, regulations, and office directives; and (3) agency personnel management evaluation systems."
5 CFR 5.3	
Corrective Action Management	"Section 5.3 discusses the Director's specific authority to direct corrective action including instructing an agency head, pursuant to an OPM evaluation or investigation, to take any necessary corrective action, including cancellation of personnel actions where appropriate."

The distribution of oversight duties to OPM came at a critical time when employment in the federal workforce was at an all time high. To implement the directives of the Civil Service Reform Act, OPM focused on decentralizing its responsibilities of recruiting and examining new employees to the agencies to make the hiring process faster and less bureaucratic (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 2001). However, agency recruitment programs were severely impacted after President Clinton's "Federal Workforce Restructuring Act of 1994" called for the downsizing of federal jobs. This instructed agencies to cut employment by 100,000 and to set limits on hiring new employees which reduced the total federal workforce by more than 250,000 (Congressional Budget Office, 1996). As a result, a number of agencies were stretched thin and did not adequately manage their downsizing, thereby affecting their ability to maintain services and productivity (Barr, 1996). Staffing levels of federal human resources decreased by 21 percent between 1993 and 1997 while some agencies even reported losing up to 40 percent of staff (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 2001).

Between the late 1990s and early 2000s, the federal government worked to re-establish recruitment efforts following President Bush's 2001 President's Management Agenda

(PMA) in which initiatives for “strategic management of human capital” and “expanding electronic government” were spotlighted as opportunities for growth. During this time, Congress passed the Veterans Employment Opportunities Act (VEOA) and VEOA became a special hiring authority that gave eligible veterans access to positions that may have only been available to competitive service employees. This appointment has accounted for the largest number of veterans hired in the federal government (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2009). OPM re-launched USAJOBS as the “one-stop” recruitment service for job seekers, shutting down agency-specific job search engines. The agency also worked to streamline the security clearance process, consolidate payroll systems, and automate the exchange of federal HR information, replacing paper employee records in a continued attempt to shorten the hiring process (Executive Office of the President, 2003). Between 2000 and 2009, recruitment and hiring flexibilities were authorized to agencies to help fill vacancies more efficiently. First, Executive Order 13162 established the Federal Career Intern Program (FCIP) which allowed agencies to hire, train, and retain entry-level employees after hiring through less competitive examining processes. Second, the Homeland Security Act of 2002 authorized the “Direct-Hire Authority” which allows agencies to expedite the hiring process by eliminating competitive ranking and veterans’ preference for positions that have been approved and have a critical hiring need. Lastly, the Federal Workforce Flexibility Act of 2004 gave agencies the discretionary authority to offer additional compensation to give themselves a competitive advantage to attract and maintain candidates in their organization (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 2006).

While efforts were made to improve federal recruitment, the Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) reported that there was still growing concern about the federal government’s ability to attract and recruit talent in a timely manner and cited that agencies were facing the following recruitment challenges (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 2004):

- ❖ Length and complexity of the hiring process
- ❖ Perceptions of noncompetitive hiring process salaries
- ❖ Poor image of the federal government as an employer
- ❖ Regulatory obstacles to entry-level hiring
- ❖ Competition among agencies
- ❖ Labor market shortages
- ❖ Budget constraints and uncertainties
- ❖ Diminishing capacity of human resources

On May 11, 2010, President Obama’s memorandum entitled, “Improving the Federal Recruitment and Hiring Process” was released as the first phase of the Administration’s

initiative to streamline the federal hiring process to make it more competitive and encouraging for the best talent to apply. Federal agencies were directed to “overhaul” the way they recruit and hire (Executive Office of the President, 2010). This hiring reform specifically directed agencies to: 1) significantly reduce the time between when a job is announced and is filled, 2) eliminate essay-style questions as an initial application requirement, 3) accept resumes and cover letters or allow applicants to complete simple applications 4) use shorter, plain-language job announcements, 5) allow hiring officials to choose from among a group of “best qualified” candidates (through expanded category rating), rather than limiting to just three top candidates, 6) notify applicants through USAJOBS about the status of their application at four key stages, 7) submit a hiring and recruitment plan for top talent to OPM within the year, and 8) encourage agency heads and senior administration officials visiting universities or colleges on official business to discuss federal career opportunities with students (U. S. Office of Personnel Management, 2010b).

To assist in executing these directives, OPM engaged federal agencies in an assessment of the current state of hiring which helped establish a baseline from which to set improvement targets. The standard hiring timeline established was aligned with OPM’s “End to End Hiring Roadmap” of an 80-day model. Job announcements for an agency’s top 10 occupations were simplified with plain language and shortened to be no longer than five pages. By the end of 2010, OPM reported that 84 percent of agencies met the five-page limit for their job announcements and 73 percent met their applicant notification requirements (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2010c). Another hiring reform initiative to help agencies recruit talent is “shared registers.” Maintained by OPM, shared registers incorporate streamlined job announcements and provide hiring pools of “best qualified” eligibles in common occupations from which agencies can choose (Kopp, 2011).

“The Federal Government benefits from a diverse workforce that includes students and recent graduates who infuse the workplace with their enthusiasm, talents, and unique perspectives.”

Executive Order 13562

On December 27, 2010, President Obama signed EO 13562 entitled, “Recruiting and Hiring Students and Recent Graduates.” The order eliminated the FCIP and improved the competitiveness of federal recruiting of talented candidates who are in school or recently received degrees or post-secondary certificates. It presented a new “umbrella” intern program known as the Pathways Programs (U.S Office of Personnel Management, 2016b). Under this umbrella, the “Internship Program” replaced

two previous programs -the Student Career Experience Program (SCEP) and Student Temporary Employment Program (STEP)- and provides students in qualifying educational institutions with paid opportunities to work in federal agencies while still in

school. The “Recent Graduates Program” is available to individuals who have received qualifying degrees or certificates within the last two years (up to six years for qualifying veterans) to obtain entry-level developmental experience designed to lead to a federal career. The third program is the “Presidential Management Fellows (PMF) Program,” formerly called the “Presidential Management Internship (PMI) Program,” which is open to individuals with qualifying advanced degrees such as a post-graduate or professional degree within the previous two years. The PMF Program is a robust leadership development program and has been aligned with academic calendars to make it more available to students (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, n.d.-m). After two years of implementation, OPM surveyed Pathways Programs appointees on their retention rate and reported that 93 percent planned to remain at their current agencies or continue to work in the federal government (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2016b).

In 2011, OPM presented the “Government-Wide Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan” to outline the implementation of EO 13583, “Establishing a Coordinated Government-Wide Initiative to Promote Diversity and Inclusion in the Federal Workforce.” This EO sought to consolidate efforts from previous EOs (13171, 13518, 13548, 13163, and 13078) and directed agencies and departments to develop and implement strategic efforts to recruit, hire, promote, and retain a diverse workforce (Office of the Press Secretary, 2011). As Borry et al. (2021) stated, when compared to past EOs that highlighted specific demographic groups and acted as affirmative action policies, EO 13583 presented a shift in emphasis from “representative bureaucracy” to “valuing an inclusive collection of individual traits” (Borry et al., 2021), which provided a refreshing and promising outlook into the future of the federal workforce. The Federal Equal Opportunity Recruitment Program (FEORP) reported in 2012 that 57 agencies submitted Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plans and were actively implementing their plans under the guidance of OPM. Within a year of implementing EO 13583, the representation of minorities in the federal workforce increased by 1.2 percent and continued to increase until 2018 by a total of 6 percent (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2018).

On June 26, 2020, President Trump issued EO 13932, “Modernizing and Reforming the Assessment and Hiring of Federal Job Candidates,” to emphasize the merit-based system that is foundational to the federal workforce and to align the hiring process by eliminating degree requirements. The EO required OPM and agencies to review job classifications and qualification requirements within the competitive service and to develop ways to assess candidates on their relevant knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) (Congressional Research Service, 2023). Before guidance for this EO was released, a new Administration took office and in December 2021, the Biden-Harris Administration released the President’s Management Agenda Vision, establishing three

priorities: 1) “strengthening and empowering the federal workforce,” 2) “delivering excellent, equitable, and secure federal services and customer experiences,” and 3) “managing the business of government to build back better” (The President’s Management Council, 2021). Six months later, OPM released guidance to implement EO 13932 where agencies identified occupations to be prioritized in transitioning to use a skills-based hiring approach. OPM included an updated “General Schedule Qualifications Operating Manual” for agencies to use to determine whether applicants meet the minimum requirements for the job. Qualification standards are meant to identify applicants who are likely to perform well on the job and weed out the ones that may not. A new “Guide to Better Occupational Questionnaires” was also created to improve the self-assessment tools agencies use to evaluate an applicant’s qualifications, training, and experience (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2022).

Over the last 20 years, four different Administrations presented management agendas and signed executive orders intended to improve and reform the overall competitive hiring process. This shows that human capital management is a priority, but that different Administrations focus on different areas of the broader topic, improving only parts of the system. During this time, OPM continued to decentralize many of its operating functions and delegated the tasks of developing and administering examinations and assessment tools to the agencies themselves. This increased the burden on an agency’s human resources department, especially when the number of specialists hired throughout the years has not increased. In addition, hiring reforms have made it easier for applicants to apply, increasing the volume of applications for agencies to review. These factors cause the hiring process to be even longer than its already lengthy, average of 80 days from start to finish. For these reasons, the federal hiring process continues to be a pain point for both agencies and applicants, realistically averaging 102 days from end to end and remaining on GAO’s list as a high-risk area in the federal government (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2023).

Federal Workforce Landscape

The federal government is America’s largest employer with more than two million civilian employees making up the federal workforce. Federal employees perform critical functions across agency mission areas that are vital to the well-being and safety of the country and the public. Serving as the backbone of the federal government, it is equally critical that the workforce is valued and supported through strategic priorities and workforce reforms. It has been over 40 years since the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 modernized the federal workforce and reaffirmed the merit-based system which continues to influence how federal recruitment is conducted today. Since the 1980s, the total number of federal civilian employees has remained steady. However, when comparing that total to the number of people in America, the proportion has significantly

decreased over the last 40 years. This means that relatively the same number of federal employees as there were in 1983 are performing the necessary functions of the federal government to provide services to 46 percent more Americans in 2023 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021).

Human capital management consistently finds a place on presidential management agendas of the past and present. In 2021, “Strengthening and Empowering the Federal Workforce” is listed as the first priority in the Biden-Harris President’s Management Agenda, aiming to address the growing concern that the federal workforce is aging and retiring at a rate more quickly than agencies are able to hire, train and replace. With almost 30 percent of federal employees older than 55, about 600,000 employees will be eligible for retirement by the end of 2023 (Office of Management and Budget, 2022). Succession planning is a strategy to alleviate this issue, however, the average age of a federal employee is 47, perpetuating the cycle to continue on again.

By 2025, Generation Z will make up one-third of the national labor force, but it is not on track to be the case for the federal workforce. The federal government has long struggled to recruit younger generations and this trend is reflected by the fact that only 8 percent of the federal workforce is under 30 years old, compared to 23 percent in the private sector. In addition, a report by Deloitte showed that federal employees in their 20s were five times more likely to quit than those in their 50s (Datar et al., 2023). One reason why younger generations are not seeking federal employment is because they do not trust the government. In a survey conducted by Next100 and GenForward, data showed that only one in four (25 percent) young adults trusted the government, while roughly one in five (21 percent) would consider working in the federal government (Araiza et al., 2022). To build trust, young adults need to see themselves represented in the government. When people see themselves reflected in an organization, then they are more inclined to want to be a part of it (Qualtrics, 2022).

“Achieving racial equity and support for underserved communities is not a one-time project. It must be a multi-generational commitment, and it must remain the responsibility of agencies across the Federal Government.”

- President Biden

One of the strategies outlined for “Strengthening and Empowering the Federal Workforce” is to, “attract and hire the most qualified employees, who reflect the diversity of our country, in the right roles across the federal government” (The President’s Management Council, 2021). In August 2022, President Biden signed the Inflation Reduction Act which allocated \$262.5 million to higher education institutions through the U.S. Department of Agriculture program called, “From Learning to Leading: Cultivating the Next Generation (NextGen) of Diverse Food and Agriculture Professionals.” The program focuses on building the next generation of diverse agricultural professionals while

lowering costs for consumers, building a clean energy economy and strong supply chains (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2023a). Arizona State University (ASU) is a recipient of the grant and through the partnership aims to fill in the gaps about USDA workforce needs based on community-supported conversations. ASU plans to lead a student experience called, “Model USDA” and to design a free education app that simulates USDA roles called, “MyUSDA.” With a priority of diversifying the workforce, this grant will prioritize underrepresented populations and prepare the younger generation for the more than 59,400 job opportunities in food, agriculture, and natural resources (Reinhart, 2023).

Another strategy is Executive Order 14035, “Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) in the Federal Workforce” which created a government-wide initiative to make sure all agencies serve as model employers for DEIA and that all employees are treated with dignity and respect. OPM Director Kiran Ahuja wrote, “Our number one mission is to equip federal agencies with the necessary resources to attract, hire, develop, and retain talented workers to make our government more efficient, resilient, and effective, while positioning the federal government as a model employer” (Miller & Ahuja, 2023). Since the EO, Agency Equity Teams were created to manage equity training and leadership in their teams as well as improve community engagement to gain input as equity plans were developed.

The federal government is often at a disadvantage to the private sector when competing for high-quality applicants because the hiring timeline is almost double in length and the salary offered is typically less - sometimes nearly 22 percent less (Weisner, 2022). However, employment within the federal government offers a number of benefits including but not limited to: generous paid leave and holiday policies, first-class benefits packages that cover employees, retirees, and their families, and flexible work arrangements and schedules to promote work/life balance (Go Government, n.d.-b).

Two different publications -one by Deloitte and the other by Partnership for Public Service- showed that Generation Z workers care about making a difference in their jobs. When asked about the most important thing when choosing a job, 54 percent said, “making a meaningful contribution to society” (Datar et al., 2023). Generation Z federal employees reported that “they value their agency’s mission, but also that they want their workplace and specific work responsibilities to closely align with their personal values.” Public service is inherently mission-driven and the chance to serve the public and make a positive difference is something that federal employees across generations credit to being the reason they remain in the federal workforce (Hyman, et. al., 2022).

Analysis

Benefits and Challenges of Working in the Public Sector

From the outside, the government may seem cumbersome and slow at times. For many U.S. citizens, the government can represent barriers and problems, rather than assistance and solutions. A 2022 report conducted by the Pew Research Center analyzed the public's perception and trust of the government and found that across political parties, socioeconomic groups, and racial demographics, Americans significantly differ. In addition, annual surveys measuring the general sentiment towards whether people trust the government shows that for nearly two decades, public trust has remained significantly low, as shown in Figure 5 (Pew Research Center, 2022).

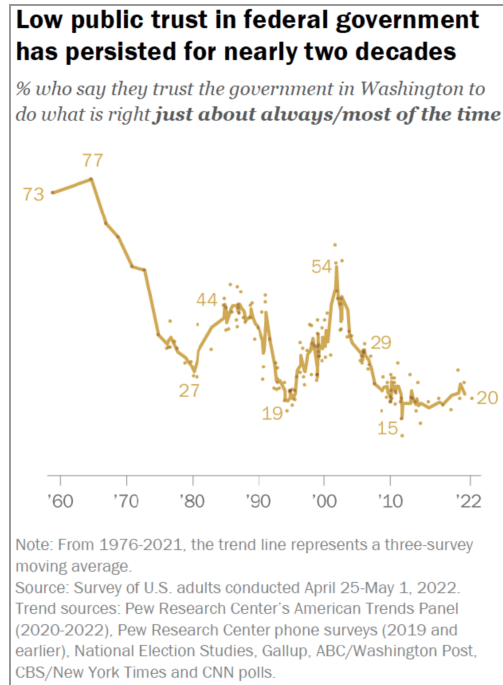


Figure 5: Graph showing the decline of trust in the federal government (Pew Research Center, 2022)

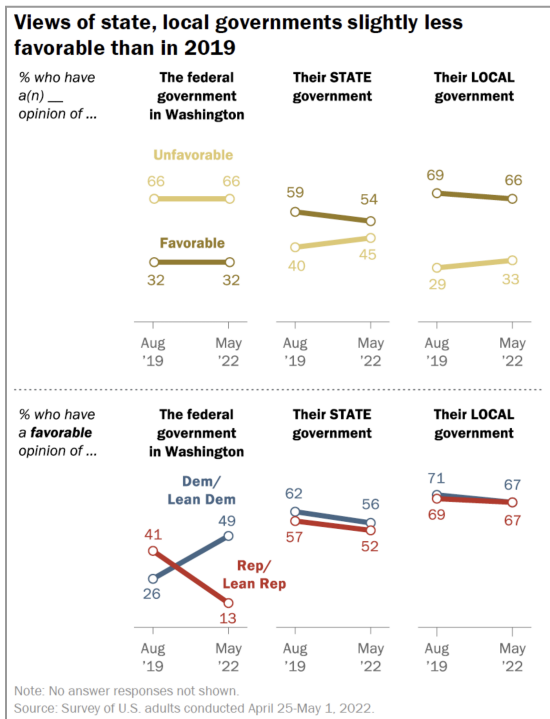


Figure 6: Graph of public's view of state and local governments (Pew Research Center, 2022)

Public views on government appear to be heavily impacted by political parties, a consistent trend across the surveys conducted as part of the Pew Research report. Shown in Figure 6 is the overall views on federal, state and local government between August 2019 and May 2022 are relatively consistent (Pew Research Center). However, when comparing the views by political party, favorable views of the federal government vary sharply depending on which party holds the presidency. While these responses may not be surprising, it does indicate deep divides between constituents of both political parties.

Despite these differences, the vast majority of Americans, when surveyed across a wide range of issues facing the nation, felt that the government should play a major role in solving these issues, as shown in Figure 7. Many participants also felt that the issues facing the government today are more challenging than in the past, as shown in Figure 8. This seems to suggest that while people may disagree about how the government is operating and whether it is effective, there is still consensus that the role of the government is important.

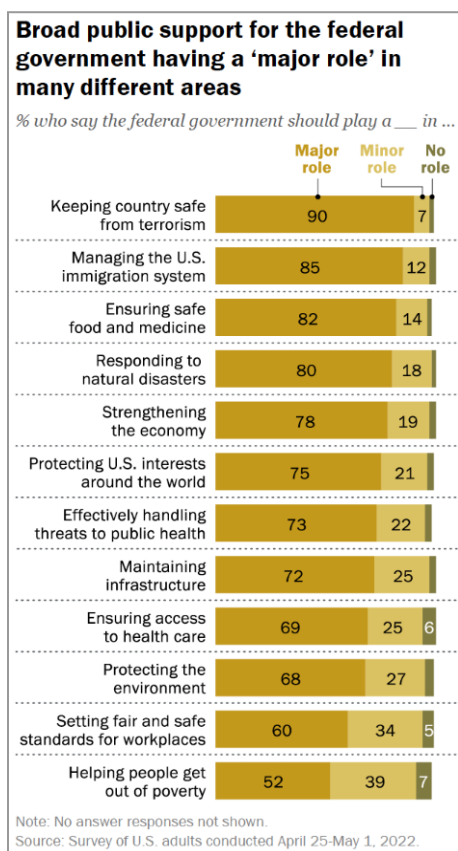


Figure 7: Chart of American's view on role of government (Pew Research Center, 2022)

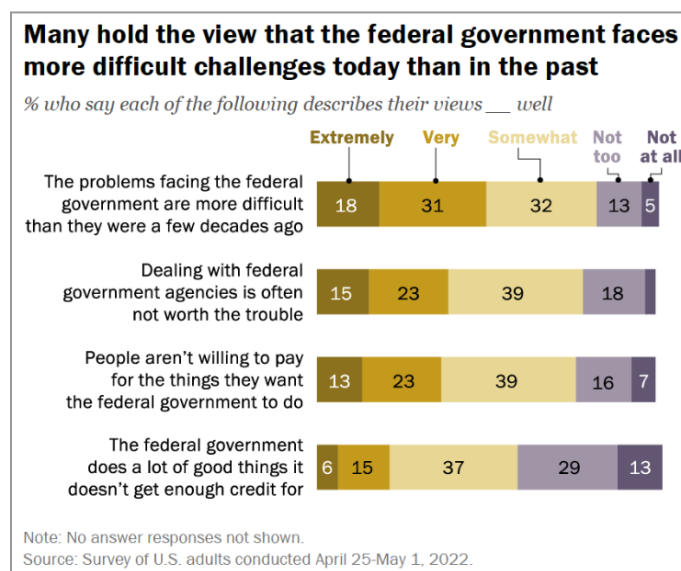


Figure 8: Chart showing public's view of the challenges faced by the government (Pew Research Center, 2022)

For many who work in the government, especially those who are not term-appointed but are career civil servants, partisan divides in the public can pose a challenge. These divides have slowed down efforts across organizations and have made meaningful progress difficult (Dimock, 2021). At the same time, however, the role and scope of the government has expanded in recent decades and there have been major accomplishments in that time. A recent article published in CNN Politics included part of a conversation between two political science professors who discussed how the divided government of recent years has still overperformed by certain measures, citing the

Affordable Care Act, the Inflation Act and the American Rescue Plan as landmark legislation (2022).

Another challenge faced by federal employees is the fact that many governmental systems have not been properly modernized (Neal, 2023). These systems include information technology and people systems that have “fallen far behind what [the] government needs to serve citizens in the twenty-first century” (National Academy of Public Administration, 2018, p.11). While there have been various efforts to modernize certain aspects of the government, there lacks a cohesive, bipartisan effort to overhaul old systems and create a more modern government. Lastly, competitive salaries in the public sector still lag behind those in the private sector and can be a deterrent to some. Government jobs pay less than private sector jobs by more than 20 percent, on average (Weisner, 2022). However, there are current efforts to address this pay gap. In March 2023, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) addressed the release of the President’s FY 2024 Budget. Highlights in the budget include investments and policies outlined to improve the federal workforce. Following last year’s 4.6 percent raise, the 2024 budget allocated another average pay increase of 5.2 percent (Miller & Ahuja, 2023).

So, why should someone consider a career in public service? Despite the challenges, the federal government still boasts some unique benefits and opportunities that continue to draw talented individuals. In Table 2 (below), a number of the benefits offered to federal employees are listed:

Table 2: Benefits Offered to Federal Employees. Source: Go Government, n.d.-b.

Benefit	Description
Health Care	Public service health care plans are among the best and often have numerous plans for employees to choose from.
Time Off and Sick Leave	The federal government has very competitive time off policies, with employees starting at 13 vacation days and increasing the longer their tenure. Employees are also given 13 days of sick leave per year.
Holidays	Employees are off on 11 federal holidays per year.
Retirement	The government is one of the few places left that still offer retirement benefits to employees. The government contributes to employee retirement in three ways, the Basic Benefit Plan, the Thrift Savings Plan and Social Security (GoGovernment, n.d).

Child/Dependent Care	Depending on the agency, child and dependent programs may be available.
Student Loan Repayment and Forgiveness	The government has two programs to provide assistance with student loans: the federal student loan repayment program and the public service loan forgiveness program.
Telework	Each agency has a policy regarding working remotely, but many employees now have the option to work remotely, some or all of the time.
Recruitment Incentives	Some agencies may offer recruitment incentives for certain positions.
Relocation Expenses	Some agencies may offer relocation incentives for certain positions.
Career Advancement	The government has a very structured approach to career advancement, with employees usually receiving a promotion or a raise every year. Employees can also apply to various roles in their agency or others. (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, n.d.-c).
Career Mobility	The government offers its employees unique abilities to try a variety of roles in different agencies. While roles may be competitive, many federal employees work for more than one agency in their career.
Networking Opportunities	OPM has a networking feature called Open Opportunities that allows federal employees to network with other employees across various agencies. Employees can find others with similar interests or find mentorship opportunities (USAJOBS, n.d.-k).
Details	On occasion, federal employees may be assigned for a short stint (e.g. 6 months) on another team or another agency (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, n.d.-f).

When speaking to federal employees throughout the research for this study, the team was curious to understand their perspective on public service and the benefits and challenges with which it comes. Many noted that the perception of a slow-moving government comes from a lack of understanding of the sheer workload of each agency. For many federal workers, their time is spent trying to get through long to-do lists, meeting deadlines and trying their best to push things over the finish line. However, the best way to describe the federal employees who participated in this study is enthusiastic, energized, passionate and motivated.

As the team concluded each of the conversations with the federal employees, they were asked what they liked about working in the public sector. Many of them referenced the benefits listed above, but almost all had something deeper to say regarding their experience. The team aggregated some of their comments, shown below in Figure 9.

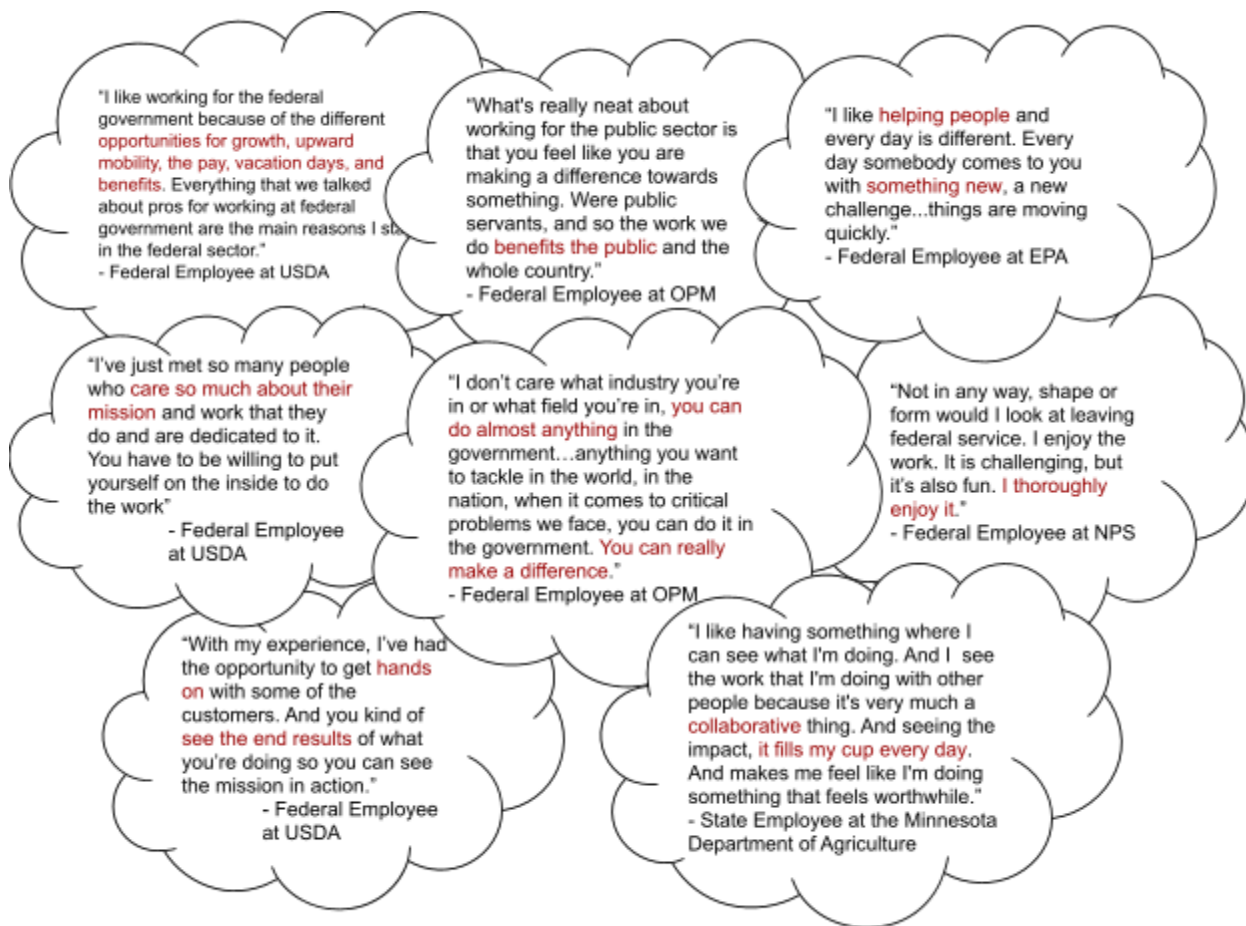


Figure 9: Quotes from study participants regarding federal experience

For those interested in solving problems and working in a fast-paced environment, a career in the federal government may be for them, as the work can be rewarding and provide immense opportunities for growth. Many who consider themselves to be mission-driven will likely appreciate the empowerment that comes with public service and, if so, may be able to mitigate the partisan divides that exist today. For those who may be looking for a short stint in civil service, the experience can still provide meaningful insights and opportunities that will enrich and empower.

Findings

Introduction to the Federal Hiring Process

The federal hiring process compared to other sectors might appear similar, but the overall framework for federal hiring is quite different. While many of the mechanisms are akin to those in the private sector, such as searching for jobs online, updating resumes based on job descriptions, and submitting applications, the end to end process and terminology differs significantly. For those unfamiliar, this can be one of the main barriers to finding employment.

Another barrier that can hinder applicants is the ability to act quickly when there are open positions on USAJOBS. Like most job searches, when a position is available, it's best to submit an application as soon as possible. However, if applicants aren't knowledgeable about the federal hiring process and the USAJOBS platform, they become less agile. The ability to read and understand job announcements and meet all of the requirements will help applicants gain efficiency. This section will cover how applicants can prepare to search for federal jobs and provide them with the proper insight into the hiring process and common terminology.

Overview of Federal Agencies

When searching for government agencies that one might want to work for, it may be surprising to learn that there are hundreds of federal agencies and that even the definition of an agency can vary. Investopedia defines an agency as “special government organizations set up for a specific purpose such as, the management of resources, financial oversight of industries, or national security issues” (2021, para. 1). Generally speaking, agencies can be organized into a few main categories, including cabinet departments, independent executive agencies, regulatory agencies, and government corporations (Lumen Learning & OpenStax, 2019). A full list of agencies can be found online (www.USA.gov contains a full list), but a good place to start is the 15 Cabinet Departments of the executive branch, shown in Appendix D.

While every department has unique career opportunities, for those interested in sustainable food systems, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is an agency for which many will be interested in working. The USDA has over 100,000 employees around the country and the USDA NextGen grant awarded to ASU will support the USDA workforce in recruiting the next generation of leaders. USDA is further divided into 29 sub-agencies and offices (Department of Agriculture, n.d.).

In addition to the USDA, other agencies (as well as independent and sub-agencies) that may appeal to those studying or interested in conservation, nature, and sustainability are listed below:

- Department of the Interior
 - National Park Service
 - Bureau of Land Management
 - U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
 - Bureau of Reclamation
- Department of Energy
 - Office Of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy
- Environmental Protection Agency
 - Office of Land and Emergency Management
 - Office of Water
 - Office of Chemical Safety and Pollution Prevention

For those newly interested in federal employment, finding the right agency can take some time and, while most agencies use the USAJOBS platform to post roles and hire candidates, it is not always an effective search tool for finding available positions. In order to find roles that interest them at specific agencies, prospective applicants are encouraged to do the following:

- Follow each agency on social media sites like LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram and Facebook
- Go to each agency's website and navigate to their career page to find available openings
- Sign up for email notifications and information for each agency
- Check the agency's website for upcoming events like career fairs, or webinars about federal careers or open positions
- Use resources like GoGovernment, a nonprofit organization that supports people looking to find federal jobs.
- Network with people who work (or have worked) in a federal job
- Use OPM's website and resources for job seekers

Eligibility Requirements

In order to work in a federal role, applicants must meet the following criteria:

- ✓ Be a U.S. citizen (with some exceptions such as foreign service positions)
- ✓ 18 years of age, or older

- ✓ Pass a background check and gain security clearances, as required by the federal position
- ✓ Meet the minimum qualifications for the position, as indicated in the job announcement
- ✓ Provide all documentation as required by the job announcement

Additionally, applicants must ensure they are eligible to apply for the specific role for which they are applying. This includes an understanding of the hiring paths and other eligibility requirements.

Federal Hiring Paths

Most federal roles that are found on USAJOBS will include a series of symbols in the description, indicating who is eligible to apply. These symbols are mapped to hiring paths, which are a primary way applicants can identify federal positions for which they are eligible. Figure 10 shows the types of hiring paths commonly used while searching for federal roles.













 <p>Open to the public U.S. citizens, nationals or those who owe allegiance to the U.S.</p>	 <p>Federal employees Current or former federal employees in the competitive or excepted services.</p>
 <p>Veterans Veterans of the U.S. Armed Forces.</p>	 <p>Military spouses Military spouses relocating under PCS orders, or whose spouse is 100% disabled or died while on active duty.</p>
 <p>National Guard & reserves Current members, those who want to join or transitioning military members.</p>	 <p>Students & recent graduates Current students enrolled in or who have graduated from an accredited educational institution</p>
 <p>Senior executives Individuals looking for an executive level job and who meet the five Executive Core Qualifications (ECQs).</p>	 <p>Individuals with disabilities Individuals who are eligible under Schedule A.</p>
 <p>Family of overseas employees Family members of a federal employee or uniformed service member who is, or was, working overseas.</p>	 <p>Native Americans Native Americans or Alaskan Natives with a tribal affiliation.</p>
 <p>Peace Corps & AmeriCorps VISTA Individuals who have served at least 2 years with the Peace Corps or 1 year with AmeriCorps VISTA.</p>	 <p>Special authorities Individuals eligible under a special authority not listed above, but defined in the federal hiring regulations.</p>

Figure 10: Hiring paths listed in USAJOBS (USAJOBS, n.d.-j)

Applicants should be aware of which hiring paths they are eligible for, and ensure they are only applying to relevant positions. For example, if an applicant applies to a job listed as open only to recent graduates and they do not meet that criteria, their application will not be considered.

Most hiring paths fall within one of the three main service categories within the federal government: Competitive Service, Excepted Service, and Senior Executive Service (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, n.d.-i). This guide will mainly focus on

competitive service positions, which consist of all civil service positions that fall within the executive branch of government. Filling competitive service positions is a highly regulated process to ensure competitiveness and fairness and includes formal assessment and ranking procedures (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.). Excepted Service and Senior Executive Service positions are governed by different hiring processes, which will not be covered in detail.

In addition to these service categories, there are also Political Appointees, which are positions filled by individuals typically nominated by a newly-elected President (Satsky, 2020), including Cabinet heads, some agency heads, and foreign ambassadors. There are usually around 4,000 positions that need to be filled in a process that varies significantly from other federal hiring processes. Political Appointees must undergo a very strict vetting process and, for roughly a quarter of the positions, a Senate hearing is required (Satsky, 2020). After each presidential election, a publication called the “United States Government Policy and Supporting Positions,” also known as the *Plum Book*, is published, identifying the roles that are subject to non-competitive appointments (Committee on Oversight and Reform, 2020). As these positions typically make up less than 10% of the overall federal workforce, this report will not cover Political Appointees in detail, but, for those interested, the *Plum Book* is a helpful resource.

While the competitive hiring process will be examined in detail, applicants should be aware of some common non-competitive and/or preferential practices that may impact the hiring paths of certain individuals, some of which are outlined below.

Special Hire Authorities. In some cases, candidates are able to apply for roles, and agencies are able to fill positions, by going through a special hiring authority. One such authority is called the Direct Hire Authority. The reasons for using this authority can vary but, primarily, “in order for an agency to use direct hire, OPM must determine that there is either a severe shortage of candidates or a critical hiring need for a position or group of positions” (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, n.d.-g, para. 1). This process allows agencies to bypass the competitive hiring process and, while they still must assess candidates for suitability, they do not have to formally rank candidates. Direct hiring may also be used to hire for specific types of positions. For example, some agencies are filling STEM positions in this manner, as this represents a critical hiring need (FEDweek, n.d.).

Other Special Hire Authorities exist in order to ensure a wide range of diverse candidates and opportunities for certain groups. These authorities include the People with Disabilities Appointing Authority, Veterans Employment Opportunity Authority,

Military Spouses, and Former AmeriCorps and Peace Corps Volunteers. Applicants who qualify for one of these groups are able to apply for positions directly and, if they meet the qualifications for the position, can be hired non-competitively. Note that individuals who may be able to pursue available positions in this manner may also apply for competitive civil service positions.



Veterans' Preference. In addition to the hiring authorities, applicants should be aware of “veterans preference” as it relates to hiring for federal roles.

“Veterans' preference in its present form comes from the Veterans' Preference Act of 1944, as amended, and is now codified in various provisions of title 5, United States Code. By law, veterans who are disabled or who served on active duty in the Armed Forces during certain specified time periods or in military campaigns are entitled to preference over others in hiring from competitive lists of eligibles and also in retention during reductions in force” (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, n.d.-n., para. 6).

Thus, for competitive service positions, qualified veterans will be given preference over non-veterans for many positions. This practice ensures that members of our armed services can continue to serve their country through federal employment. These candidates must be qualified for the roles they apply to and if they are, they may be given preference over other candidates.

According to a 2019 report by the Partnership for Public Service, veterans make up 32.9 percent of the federal workforce. The report also notes that veterans are most likely to be employed at agencies that oversee defense and security activities, as shown in Figure 11. Over 70 percent of veterans work for agencies such as Veterans Affairs (VA), Homeland Security and military departments. In contrast, agencies like USDA employ less than 4 percent of veterans.

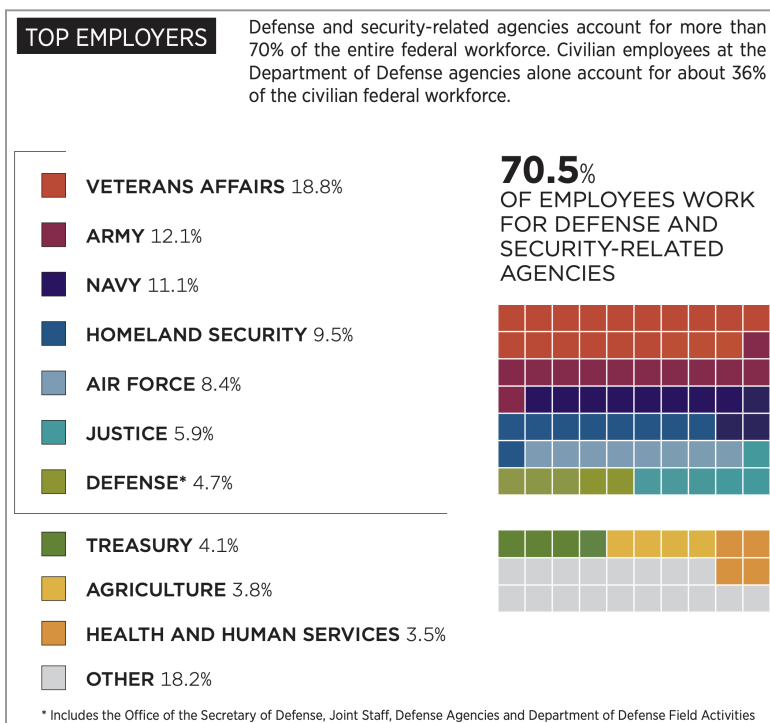


Figure 11: Top employers of veterans (Partnership for Public Service, 2019)

Veterans preference is a consideration for many roles but non-veteran candidates should not feel that their ability to gain federal employment is significantly limited because of this factor, especially if the agency they are interested in employs a lower percentage of veterans.



Pathways Programs (Internship Program, Recent Graduates Program and Presidential Management Fellows Program).



Another unique hiring path is the Pathways Programs, which provides federal employment opportunities to students and recent graduates. These programs were designed “to help agencies recruit and hire well-qualified students and recent graduates by streamlining processes and providing applicants with clear paths

PMF

to internships and full-time employment, as well as meaningful training, mentoring and career-development opportunities” (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2016d, p. 3). The Pathways Programs includes internship opportunities, as well as entry-level positions, for recent graduates of bachelor's and master's programs from accredited institutions. Students who have graduated within the last two years are eligible to search for and apply to these positions, which start as term positions but can be transferred to permanent positions.

The Presidential Management Fellows (PMF) Program is a unique but highly-competitive opportunity for recent graduates of advanced degree programs. Those selected as fellows serve for two-years as part of a leadership development program with the potential to transfer to a permanent position at a high grade level (discussed below) and the ability to work at more than one agency (Presidential Management Fellows, 2022). The application process is lengthy and includes a behavior assessment, situational assessment and formal interviews (Presidential Management Fellows, 2023), but those selected as finalists are given the opportunity to fast-track their career in the government.

Job Classification and General Schedule Levels

Job Classification. Another important feature of the federal hiring process is the way jobs are classified. The U.S. Office of Personnel Management's Classification Handbook (1991) states that classification “recognizes levels of difficulty and responsibility in terms of the grade levels established in law” (p. 4) and brings consistency to the overall hiring process. The OPM is required by law to bring consistent definitions to various positions, as well as establish official position titles and grade levels. For white collar jobs within the government, each position is also classified according to its occupational series, which is the way similar occupations are grouped (USAJOBS, n.d.-1). Occupational series are sometimes included as a four-digit code in

the job announcement (e.g. 0300 series is General Administrative, Clerical and Office Services and 0400 series is Natural Resources Management and Biological Sciences). While applicants may not need to know the series of the positions they are interested in, they can use the occupational series to search for positions on USAJOBS. The full list of occupational series can be found in the Help section of the platform.

"Within human resources you have different types of HR. You have recruitment and staffing, which is just that, they are the ones publicizing the position on USAJobs. They are actively recruiting and then staffing the position. Kind of an offshoot of recruitment and staffing is what a lot of the HR assistants do, which is processing the personnel action. So, we're basically doing the work that's gonna get the new employee paid and making sure that they get signed up for benefits. You will also see **classification**. Classification can either be part of recruitment and staffing or it can be a standalone position. For every position within the federal government, there is a position description and that position description has to have been classified by an HR specialist against OPM, Office of Personnel Management."

- Junell Norris

Human Resources Specialist, National Park Service

General Schedule Levels. The General Schedule Level (GSL), commonly referred to as "grade level", is the "classification and pay system that covers the majority of civilian white-collar Federal employees in professional, technical, administrative, and clerical positions" (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, n.d.-h). It ranges from GS-1 to GS-15 and each year, the government sets the pay scale at each level (see Appendix E for the 2023 rates). Each grade level has 10 steps and, unless promoted early or by applying to a higher-grade position, employees cannot move to the next level until they progress through each step. First-time federal employees will almost always start at the Step 1 for the grade level for which they have been hired, but they may receive certain incentives, such as relocation, that may be in addition to their starting pay.

To progress through the steps, employees are typically subject to a waiting period, which varies depending on their current step. For steps 1-3, the waiting period is one year, for steps 4-6, the period is 2 years, and for steps 7-9, the period is 3 years. That represents an 18-year period to move from one grade level to the next, but "GS employees may advance to higher grades by promotion at certain intervals (generally after at least a year), as determined by OPM regulations and qualification standards and agency policies" (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, n.d.-h, para. 5).

When reviewing GS levels, applicants should be aware that certain grades correspond with educational requirements, in addition to experience. Figure 12 shows the grade levels and their corresponding education level. Applicants unsure about what grade level positions they should apply for should first reference their educational level. This, combined with their level of experience may give them a GS range of a few levels. For example, those with a bachelor's degree from an accredited college are qualified for grade levels 5 or 7, depending on the agency and/or the GPA of the applicant. However, combined with experience, the applicant may be qualified for positions at grade level 9.

GS-1	No high school diploma
GS-2 (GS-3 for clerk-steno positions)	High school diploma or equivalent
GS-3	High school graduation or 1 year of full-time study after high school
GS-4	Associate degree or 2 years of full-time study after high school
GS-5 or GS-7, depending on agency policy and applicant's academic credentials	Bachelor's degree or 4 years of full-time study after high school
GS-7	Bachelor's degree plus 1 year of full-time graduate study
GS-9 (GS-11 for some research positions)	Master's degree or 2 years of full-time graduate study
GS-9	Law degree (J.D. or LL.B.)
GS-11 (GS-12 for some research positions)	Ph.D. or equivalent doctorate or advanced law degree (LL.M.)

Figure 12: GS Levels by education (Crosby, 2019)

Appointment Types

There are two main types of appointments for federal employees: permanent and temporary. Employees with permanent appointments are typically hired under a “career-conditional appointment” which means that after completing a probationary period (normally one year) and three consecutive years of creditable service, they will attain a career appointment (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, n.d.-d). Career appointments come with certain benefits, including the ability to be reinstated in a federal position if the employee leaves public service.

The other main appointment type is a term appointment. Term appointments last for a specified period of time, usually of 1 year or 4 years. Term appointments may be renewed but are not eligible for permanent status (Title 5, 1968) and some benefits do not apply to term employees (such as retirement programs).

Less-common appointment types include seasonal positions, as well as intermittent positions. These positions are typically shorter-term but may recur regularly (e.g. annually each summer), and may even turn into permanent positions depending on the agency and the budget. One example of seasonal work is with the U.S. National Park Service, who routinely hire seasonal rangers (U.S. National Parks Service, 2020).

Documentation

Like all job searches, being prepared with the right documentation is important. For federal jobs, documentation requirements may vary depending on the position but the main requirement is a federal resume. Below are some types of documentation prospective applicants should prepare when searching for federal employment:

Federal Resumes. Unlike most resumes for private sector jobs, a federal resume does not adhere to the one-page rule. Federal resumes require far more detailed information and will be multiple pages. Most applicants will revise their resume depending on the job they are applying for, but it's recommended to have a master federal resume on hand that can continually be updated. There are federal resume builders and templates available online but at a minimum, a federal resume should include the following:

- ✓ Citizen Status
- ✓ Work experience. All relevant jobs need to include the employer name, location, position title and start and end dates for all roles held at a particular company. The resume should also include the average hours worked per week and summarize the roles and responsibilities, as well as key accomplishments (Go Government, n.d.-e)
- ✓ Education. List all schools attended, relevant courses and degrees earned
- ✓ Other relevant experience such as volunteer work, certificates earned, language skills, professional organizations, professional publications, awards, leadership activities and training
- ✓ Professional references (optional but recommended)

Federal resumes should include all applicable experience for an applicant but should also be easy to read and clear. Bulleted lists are recommended for each position an applicant has held and should include all relevant experience and accomplishments without becoming overly technical. Applicants should also be sure to read all instructions regarding

"As you're writing bullets in your resume, it's important to remember 3 things. One is you should describe the task you did, two is you should try to quantify whatever you can and three, what was the impact or result?"

- Pamela Berland Ex, Career Coach for Federal and Intl. Affairs Jobs

resumes before submitting applications, as some agencies may have specific requirements that differ from a typical federal resume format.

College Transcripts. Many jobs, especially within the GS5 to GS9 levels, will require college transcripts. The job announcement will confirm if a transcript is needed. Applicants should request official transcripts from an academic institution ahead of time, so they are available if needed. If an applicant is still finishing their degree program, they can request unofficial transcripts and send official transcripts at a later date.

References. References are required for most applications so applicants should identify who will serve as a professional reference before applying to federal roles. Applicants should confirm with each reference before listing them in their application.

LinkedIn Profile. While not a type of documentation required for federal job applications, many federal agencies use LinkedIn to recruit, market, and post open positions. It's recommended that prospective applicants update their LinkedIn profile and connect with various agencies and professional organizations. There is also the potential to connect with federal employees and organizations over LinkedIn and having a completed profile will help during these types of interactions. The LinkedIn website has a robust support section with resources on how to build a strong profile and use the platform strategically.

Hiring Timelines

Federal hiring processes can be quite slow, even with more recent efforts to streamline the process and bring on qualified candidates sooner. In March 2017, the Office of Personnel Management launched the End to End Hiring Initiative, which was “designed to focus on the applicant: his or her expectations, needs and interests” (p. 3) and improve the major Human Resources processes around posting jobs and hiring applicants. The initiative has five components: workforce planning, recruitment, hiring process, security and suitability and orientation. One of the main goals of the program include better partnerships with agencies to improve each component and provide transparency in terms of what the agency is responsible for versus the OPM. Figure 13 shows the breakdown of the hiring elements and who is responsible.

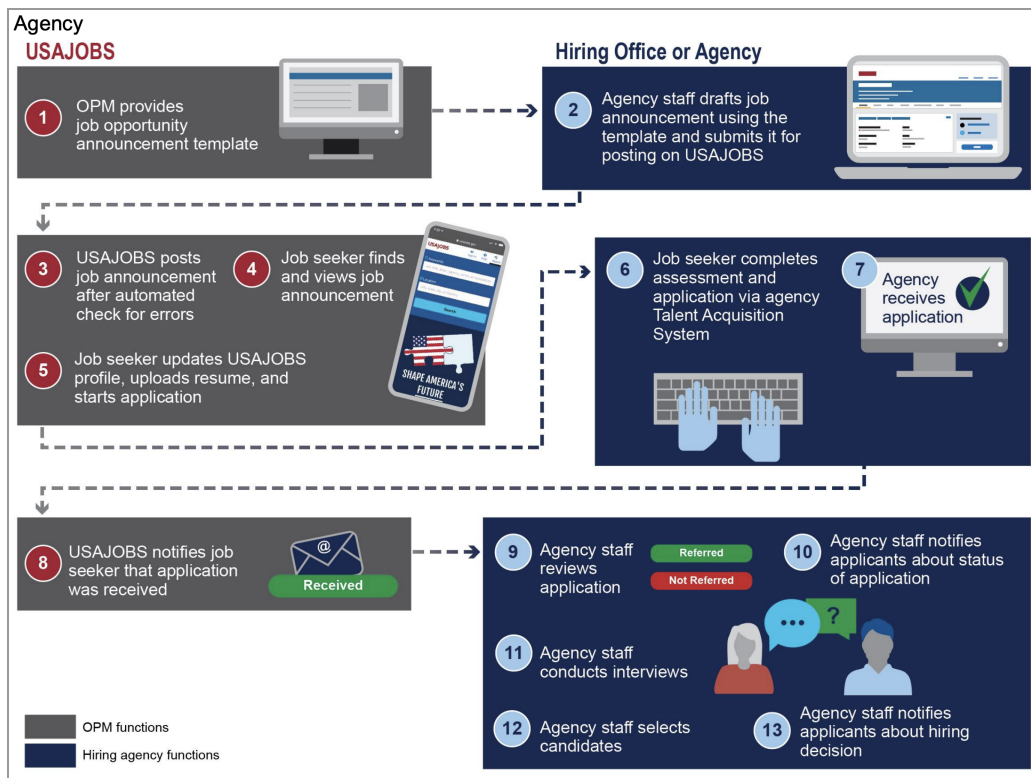


Figure 13: Steps in the federal hiring process (Government Accountability Office, 2020)

Another main goal of the initiative is to decrease the amount of time it takes agencies to hire candidates. Currently, the average time is approximately 100 days from job creation to employee hire, but the target is 80 days (Go Government, n.d.-d). After the job announcement closes, agencies will spend the next several weeks reviewing applications and then reaching out to top candidates for interviews. Once a selection is made and a tentative offer is sent, the biggest factor in determining when a candidate will start depends on the background check and security clearance. See Appendix F for more details on the End to End Hiring Initiative.

Other Federal Job Boards

While the USAJOBS platform is the primary job board for federal positions, there are separate boards that applicants can explore that are also hosted on USAJOBS and managed by the OPM. Positions on these boards may not be available on the main platform and are often organized by discipline (e.g. technology) or by current legislation (e.g. the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law Portal). Table 3, below, has a list of specialized job boards.

Table 3: Specialized Job Boards Through USAJOBS

Job Board	URL	Description
Bipartisan Infrastructure Law Portal	https://bil.usajobs.gov	Jobs related to the 2021 passing of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.
Tech Portal	https://tech.usajobs.gov	Launched in December 2021 and has positions in technology and related fields.
Intern Portal	https://intern.usajobs.gov	Organizes available intern positions across federal agencies.
STEM Portal	https://stem.usajobs.gov	Launched in June 2023 and has jobs in the STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics).
National Security Portal	https://natsec.usajobs.gov	Launched in June 2023 and has positions in national security and foreign policy across various agencies.

Guide to Navigating USAJOBS and the Federal Hiring Process

Now that users have some context regarding the federal hiring process and common terminology, it's time to start using the USAJOBS platform. The following guide will provide step-by-step instructions for using the platform to search for and apply to federal positions, as well as helpful information regarding applicant screening, interviewing and security checks. For each of these components, the main steps are outlined, but more importantly, there are useful tips and tricks that will help applicants become more efficient at each stage. This information was compiled using data from conversations with Human Resources Specialists at various federal agencies and other leaders with expertise regarding the federal hiring process and using USAJOBS, as well as additional research.

SECTION 1: GETTING STARTED ON USAJOBS

Create an Account. In order to start using USAJOBS, prospective applicants need to set up an account on the platform. Once an account is created, it will be used for all future job searching, document organization and applications. To create an account, navigate to www.usajobs.gov and select either “sign in” or “create profile” from the home page, as shown in Figure 14. Applicants will enter a preferred email address and password, select their preferred language for email communication, and select the checkbox after reading through the Rules of Use.

Tip!

For students, it's recommended to use a personal email address instead of a school address so there is no issue accessing USAJOBS or other sites after leaving the academic institution.

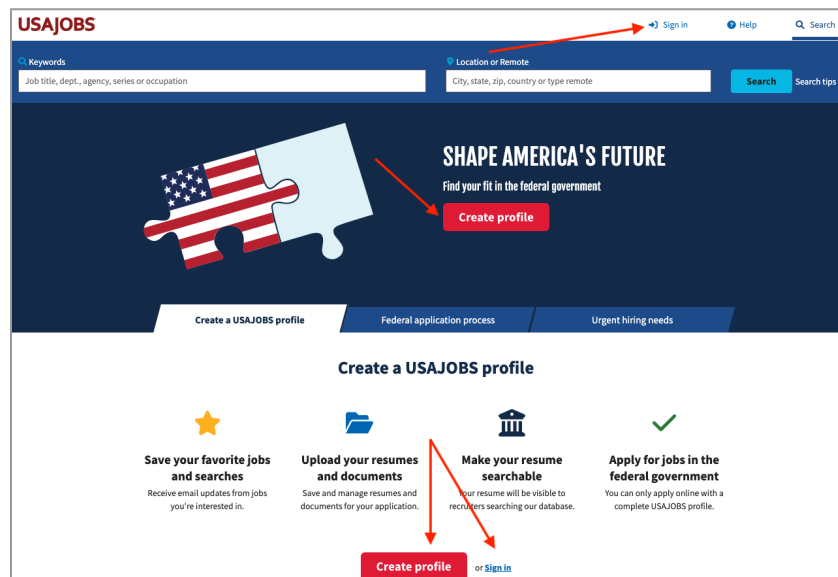


Figure 14: USAJOBS Homepage (USAJOBS, n.d.-h)

Create a Profile. After an account is created, the next step is to create a profile. Profiles can be updated at any point but it's recommended that applicants enter as much information as possible in the beginning. To set up a profile, select “create profile” from the home screen and fill out the requested information, as shown in Figure 15.

Once complete, the user will be navigated to a Profile dashboard, where additional information can be filled in, including Demographics, Citizenship, Hiring Paths, Experience, and Education. As the sections are completed, a green checkmark will appear in the top right corner of the corresponding section, as shown in Figure 16. However, profiles should be updated whenever there is a relevant change (e.g. an academic degree, certification or experience).

Create your profile

You need to create a USAJOBS profile to apply for jobs, save searches and save jobs.

Contact Information

First name

Last name

Street address

If you do not have a mailing address at the time of job application, consider using the address of a family member, friend or religious or social organizations. Another option is [general delivery offered by the U.S. Postal Service](#).

Street address 2 (Optional)

If you do not have a mailing address at the time of job application, consider using the address of a family member, friend or religious or social organizations. Another option is [general delivery offered by the U.S. Postal Service](#).

Country

Find a country by scrolling through the list or opening the menu and typing the name of the country. To select, click or press enter on the highlighted country.

Figure 15: Applicant profile setup page (USAJOBS, n.d.-e)

The screenshot shows a user profile page with a navigation bar at the top containing 'Home', 'Profile', 'Documents', 'Preferences', and 'Sign out'. The profile is for 'Abigail Martone' with initials 'AM'. A green checkmark and the text 'Complete - Edit' are visible in the top right. The profile details are as follows:

- Address:** 185 Webster Avenue, Apt 2A, Jersey City, NJ, 07307, United States
- Email:** abigail.martone@gmail.com
- Password:** A red shield icon followed by the text 'LOGIN.GOV'
- Mobile:** A partially obscured number starting with '10610301'

Figure 16: Applicant profile sections (USAJOBS, n.d.-e)

Documents and Preferences. After completing the profile, select the Documents tab in the top left corner of the screen. Here, users can upload a federal resume or use the resume building tool to complete a resume. Users can decide how to add their resume, but it's recommended to have it completed before starting to search for jobs. For each position applied to, it's likely the resume will be revised, but having a strong resume template will help users submit applications faster.

Tip!

Once the federal resume is complete, it's recommended to make it searchable within USAJOBS, which allows agencies to access it. This can be done by clicking the checkbox on the top of the Documents page.

- Junell Norris
Human Resources Specialist with the
National Park Service

Once the resume is uploaded, the last step is to fill out the Preferences section, which is the tab next to "documents" in the upper left corner, which is shown in Figure 17. Once selected, users will be prompted to fill out a brief questionnaire with questions regarding their preferences for travel, location and appointment type.

Home Profile Documents **Preferences** Sign out

Preferences

Travel & Relocation

Are you willing to travel?

Yes
 No

What percentage of duty time will you travel?

25% or less

Are you willing to relocate?

Yes
 No

Desired work locations

Location

City, State, Region or Country

Appointment type & work schedule

What type of work are you willing to accept?

All
 Permanent
 Temporary
 Term
 Detail
 Seasonal

Figure 17: Applicant preferences (USAJOBS, n.d.-d)

SECTION 2: SEARCHING FOR AND APPLYING TO FEDERAL ROLES ON USAJOBS

Before beginning a formal job search using USAJOBS, it's recommended that applicants ensure the following list is completed. The more items that can be checked off, the more effective job search efforts will be.

- Set Up Account on USAJOBS
- Complete Profile on USAJOBS
- Update LinkedIn Profile
- Create Federal resume and Upload to USAJOBS
- Obtain College Transcripts
- Sign up for newsletters from various federal agencies and departments
- Identify relevant Hiring Paths

2.1 Search Tools

Using Keywords Effectively. To begin searching for jobs, start on the home page, where there is the option to search by keywords or by location, as shown in Figure 18.



The image shows a search interface with two input fields. The first field is labeled 'Keywords' and contains the placeholder text 'Job title, dept., agency, series or occupation'. The second field is labeled 'Location or Remote' and contains the placeholder text 'City, state, zip, country or type remote'. To the right of these fields is a blue 'Search' button and a link for 'Search tips'.

Figure 18: Search function on the USAJOBS Homepage (USAJOBS, n.d.-h)

As users type keywords, suggestions will auto populate. If selected, the results will be populated by the most relevant jobs first (i.e. if the keyword is in the job title). Users can also use multiple keywords but often, the most effective job search will come from using filters, which are found on the results page after the home page search.

Unless the user is looking for a specific job post and they know the title of the position, it's recommended to start with broader search terms, such as the agency name or general occupation, which can then be narrowed down by applying filters. Table 4, below, has an example of broad keywords one might use to find relevant positions, depending on their background and interests.

Table 4: List of Keywords

Background/Interest	Search Keywords
Program and/or Management Analyst	Management, programs, systems, development, procedures, performance measurement, evaluation, studies, briefings
Environmental Specialist	Environmental compliance, standards, environmental justice, environmental data, environmental projects, community engagement, life science, environmental regulations
Agricultural Research	Agronomy, soil science, microbiology, plant nutrition, field experience, experiments, geospatial
Natural Resources	Conservation, soil conservation, natural resource management, forestry, agricultural education, conservation plans, conservation programs

Navigating Search Results. After typing in keywords from the home page, USAJOBS will return a list of relevant job announcements. Understanding the components of these announcements will allow users to quickly find roles in which they are interested in applying. Figure 19 shows the various components of the results page.

The screenshot displays the USAJOBS search results interface. At the top, there are search input fields for 'Keywords' (containing 'usda') and 'Location or Remote'. Below these are various filter buttons such as 'Full-time', 'Permanent', 'Recent graduates', 'Presidential Management Fellows (PMFs)', 'Temporary', and 'Detail'. A filter for '25% or less' is highlighted with a red circle labeled '1'. A notification bar indicates 'You're now using 9 filters from your profile for this search.' with a red circle labeled '2'. On the right side, there are buttons for 'Top filters' (labeled '3') and 'More filters' (labeled '4'). The main content area shows a list of job announcements, with the first one being 'Program Manager (Risk Management Officer)' and the second being 'International Trade Specialist'. A 'Save this search' button is highlighted with a red circle labeled '5'. The sidebar on the right lists various hiring paths like 'Open to the public', 'Federal employees', 'Armed forces', and 'Students & recent graduates'.

Figure 19: Search results on USAJOBS (USAJOBS, n.d.-g)

- 1) When searching from the home page, additional filters are automatically applied based on the user's preferences. To remove any of these filters, click the "x" in the green bar.
- 2) Users can easily toggle the preference filters from their profile by clicking the button on or off at any time.
- 3) The top filters are included on the right hand side of all searches and include the hiring paths, pay scale, and GS level(s).
- 4) Additional filters are available to refine search terms, including location, remote work, work schedule, and appointment type.

Using Filters. USAJOBS has a variety of filters that will help users find relevant positions. Becoming proficient with filters can significantly speed up job searching and allow users to save job postings, apply to available jobs, and set up job alerts for future announcements. As shown above in Figure 19, filters are available on the right hand side of the screen of the search results page. Becoming familiar with the filter options will make it easier to narrow down extensive search results and find relevant job postings.

Users should start with the top filters and select the applicable hiring paths (e.g. "open to public", "student", or "veterans") to find jobs for which they are eligible. It's recommended that users also filter by grade level (GS level) to ensure they are applying to positions that align with their education and/or experience. To do this, select the button next to "grade" click on the applicable grade levels, as shown in Figure 20.

Tip!

You can filter by Pay scale but if you are filtering by GS Level, the pay scale will automatically adjust.

Pay [? Help](#)

Salary

\$0 \$500,000

\$37,696 (min GS 5) - \$74,250 (max GS 9)

[Reset](#)

Grade

< GS1	GS 1	GS 2	GS 3	GS 4	GS 5
GS 6	GS 7	GS 8	GS 9	GS 10	GS 11
GS 12	GS 13	GS 14	GS 15	> GS15	

General Schedule (GS) equivalent

Figure 20: Filtering by GS Level (USAJOBS, n.d.-g)

Users can also narrow down results by agency and occupational series. Occupational series filters can be useful if the user knows the series they are interested in, as it will bring up a wide range of positions across various federal agencies.

For additional filters, select “more filters” and review the options. Many of these will be preselected based on the user’s demographic information but can be revised if desired.

Saving searches and getting notified of new job postings. Once the desired filters have been applied, users can elect to save searches so they can be notified of new job postings. Users can also choose to have the postings emailed to them and apply to positions as they become available. Many job announcements are posted for only a few days or weeks so being aware of new postings is key to an applicant’s job search. As shown in Figure 21, users can save desired searches and individual job postings.

Tip!

Once the basic searches are saved, users can save additional searches for specific job titles across single or multiple agencies. This way, if there is a highly desired position available, the notification will be sent via email.

The screenshot displays the USAJOBS search interface. At the top, there are several filter buttons: 'Full-time', 'Permanent', 'Recent graduates (Appointment type)', 'Presidential Management Fellows (PMFs)', 'Temporary', 'Detail', 'Not required (Travel percentage)', 'Occasional travel', '25% or less', and 'Open to the public'. A 'Remove all filters' link is also present. Below the filters, it says 'Viewing 1 - 25 of 576 jobs'. A 'Sort by' dropdown menu is set to 'Relevance'. A blue banner at the top of the job listings area contains the text 'Save this search. We'll email you new jobs as they become available.' and a 'Save Job' button with a star icon. Two job listings are visible: 'DIRECTOR HUMAN RESOURCES' and 'LOAN SPECIALIST (COMML)'. Each listing includes the job title, department, location, and a 'Save Job' button.

Figure 21: Saving searches on USAJOBS (USAJOBS, n.d.-g)

2.2 How to Read Jobs Postings Effectively

Once applicants are comfortable using USAJOBS's search features and their documentation is in order, the next step is to apply to jobs for which they are qualified. To do this, applicants must be proficient at reading job announcements. The details included in each announcement vary so applicants must read through each section carefully. There are two versions of the job announcement that applicants should be able to understand: the basic job announcement that appears in the USAJOBS search results, and the detailed announcement when a particular position is selected.

Elements of a basic job announcement. Each job announcement will have a basic job announcement, often seen as part of a list when searching for positions on USAJOBS. Figure 22 shows a list of positions and their basic job descriptions returned after inputting keywords into the search bar. The various elements are indicated by the circled numbers.

The screenshot displays a list of job announcements on the USAJOBS website. At the top, there is a banner that says "Save this search. We'll email you new jobs as they become available." Below this, three job listings are shown, each with a "Save Job" button (indicated by a star icon). The first listing is for "DIRECTOR HUMAN RESOURCES" (circled 1), located in "Multiple Locations" (circled 2), with an announcement period from "07/28/2023 to 08/18/2023" (circled 3). The salary is "Starting at \$189,354 Per Year (ES 00)" (circled 4) and it is a "Permanent • Full-time" position (circled 5). The second listing is for "LOAN SPECIALIST (COMML)" (circled 1), located in "Monroe, Georgia" (circled 2), with an announcement period from "08/04/2023 to 08/10/2023" (circled 3). The salary is "Starting at \$72,974 Per Year (GS 11-12)" (circled 4) and it is a "Permanent • Full-time" position (circled 5). The third listing is for "Loan Assistant/Specialist (Agricultural)" (circled 1), located in "Bowling Green, Kentucky" (circled 2), with an announcement period from "07/25/2023 to 08/08/2023" (circled 3). The salary is "Starting at \$37,696 Per Year (GS 5-9)" (circled 4) and it is a "Permanent • Full-time" position (circled 5). Each listing also includes icons for application methods (circled 6).

Figure 22: Elements of a basic job announcement (USAJOBS, n.d.-g)

- 1) **Job title.** Directly below is the sub-agency and the agency.
- 2) **Job location.** This is where the candidate must be based in order to work in the position. Applicants can apply to positions outside of where they currently live but, if hired for the role, they would be required to move.
- 3) **Announcement dates.** These dates indicate when the job announcement is open and when it closes. Users should take note

of these dates when applying to positions. The clock icon will be gray when the announcement still has ample time for applicants to apply, orange if the announcement is about halfway through the timeframe, and red when it is nearing its close day.

Tip!

When applying to multiple positions, users should first apply to roles with the orange and red clock icons first, as these are nearing their close date. Icons with the grey icon can be saved and applied for later.

- 4) **Starting Pay and GS level.** This is found on the left hand side of the job announcement.
- 5) **Appointment Type.** This indicates if the position is for a term or permanent appointment.
- 6) **Hiring Path.** Every job announcement will include symbols indicating the hiring path. Applicants should make sure they are only applying for roles that have hiring paths for which they are eligible.

Applicants can scroll through lists of basic job announcements to find roles that are of interest, and either apply directly or save the position in their dashboard.

Elements of a detailed job announcement. Once an applicant selects a job posting, they will be able to view the details of the position. Each announcement will vary, but most contain the same elements. Being able to read through the components of a role is important to understand the job description, qualifications and instructions for applying. This can take some time but with practice, it will be easier and help with submitting strong applications.

In conversations with USAJOBS experts, valuable insight was gained regarding how to navigate job announcements. One such expert is Pamela Berland Ex, a career coach for federal and international affairs jobs as well as a former contractor for the Department of State. Her advice and method for applying to jobs is one that is recommended to all prospective applicants and includes reading the sections of the job announcement in a particular order:

- 1) Overview
- 2) How You Will Be Evaluated
- 3) Requirements (includes the qualifications)
- 4) Assessment Questions
- 5) Duties
- 6) Required Documents
- 7) How to Apply

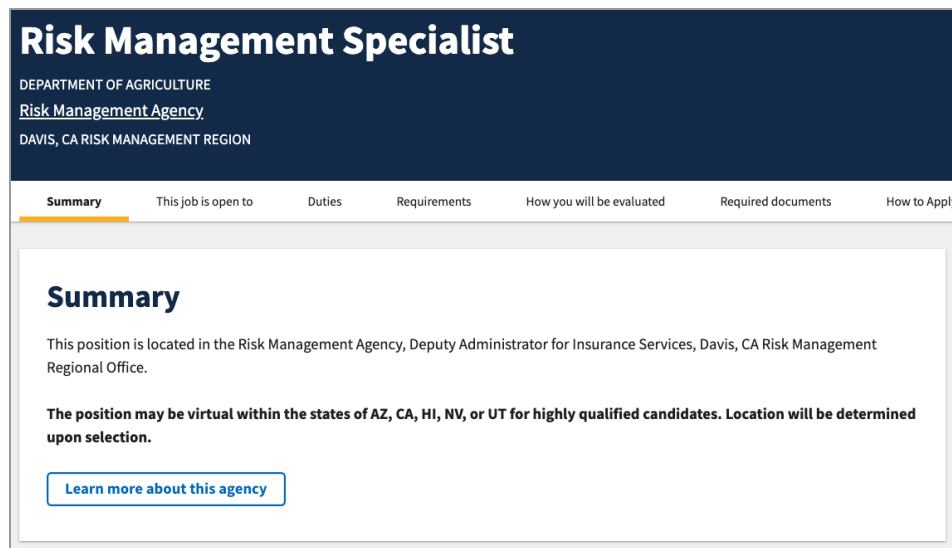
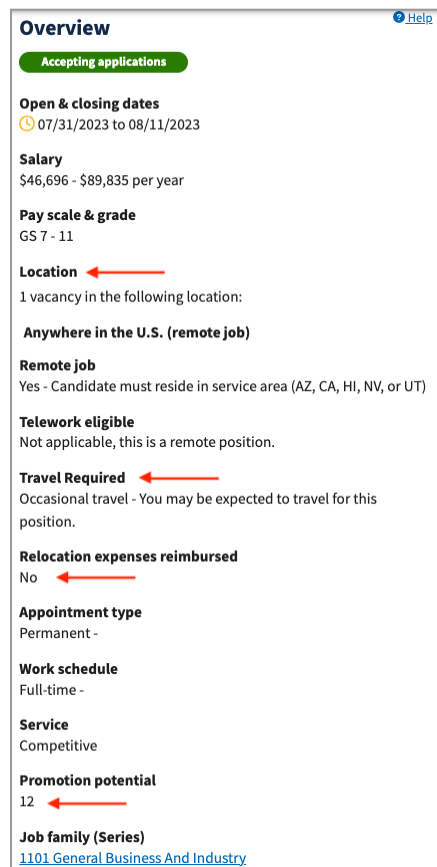


Figure 23: Tabs of the detailed job announcement (USAJOBS, n.d.-c)

Applicants can navigate to each section directly by using the tabs at the top of the job announcement, as shown in Figure 23.



Overview. The overview section is a good place for applicants to start as it provides general information about the position, including how many vacancies there are and where the position is based. Figure 24 shows the overview for a position that lists the location as “anywhere in the U.S.,” meaning that it is a remote job. Further down in the overview, it also notes that this position is not available for a relocation reimbursement.

Additional details in this section include whether travel is expected for the role. The position in Figure 24 requires occasional travel, so potential applicants should make sure they are comfortable with this requirement. The

overview section also indicates that this position has a promotion potential up to a GS level 12.

Tip!

Look out for internal notices on the job announcement that may indicate that the announcement will close after receiving a certain amount of applications. This may mean the announcement will close earlier than the listed close date.

- Junell Norris,
Human Resources Specialist with the
National Park Service

Figure 24: Job overview (USAJOBS, n.d.-c)

How You Will Be Evaluated. Like all competitive service positions, applicants will be assessed and ranked based on their qualifications and all job announcements will provide details on the evaluation process. As shown in Figure 25 (below), candidates will be categorized as Best Qualified, Well Qualified, or Qualified, based on the “quality of experience and the extent they possess the following knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA) or competencies.” The main KSAs are listed and applicants should carefully review this list. Whatever KSAs the applicant possesses should be verified by their federal resume and/or the Assessment Questionnaire.

“Qualified means you meet the minimum standards, well qualified means you are above average and best qualified means you're the cream of the crop...only the [best] qualified group will get on a certificate of eligibles. Then, the hiring manager or hiring committee will review the [certificate of eligibles] and they can take different steps at that time. They can decide to do a quick screening and/or choose a certain number to interview more in depth...and make the decision from there.”

- Pamela Berland Ex
Career Coach for Federal and Intl. Affairs Jobs

How You Will Be Evaluated

You will be evaluated for this job based on how well you meet the qualifications above.

Applicants who meet basic minimum qualifications will be placed in one of three categories: Best Qualified, Well Qualified, or Qualified. Within these categories, applicants eligible for veteran's preference will receive selection priority over nonveterans. Category placement will be determined based on applicants' quality of experience and the extent they possess the following knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA) or competencies:

Note: If after reviewing your resume and/or supporting documentation, a determination is made that you have inflated your qualifications and or experience, your score may be adjusted to more accurately reflect your abilities, or you may be found ineligible. Please follow all instructions carefully. Errors or omissions may affect your rating. Providing inaccurate information on Federal documents could be grounds for non-selection or disciplinary action up to including removal from the Federal service.

Clicking the link below will present a preview of the application form; i.e. the online questionnaire. The application form link below will only provide a preview and does not initiate the application process. To initiate the online application process, click the "Apply" button to the right.

To view the application form, visit: <https://apply.usastaffing.gov/ViewQuestionnaire/12061597>

Figure 25: How you will be evaluated in the detailed job announcement (USAJOBS, n.d.-c)

Requirements. The next section an applicant should review is the Requirements section. This section will build on the KSAs with more detailed information regarding the type of experience and/or education a qualified applicant must have. Like the KSAs, all qualifications possessed by the applicant should be included in their federal resume. For job postings that have multiple GS levels, the qualifications for each level will be specified. For the job announcement in Figure 26 (below), there are qualifications for both a GS-7 level and a GS-9 level.

Qualifications

The Pathways Recent Graduate Program is for recently graduated or graduating individuals who are looking for developmental experiences in the Federal Government intended to promote possible careers in the civil service. Recent Graduates will serve on this appointment for one year learning the fundamentals of the position for which they can be converted.

To be eligible, applicants must meet one of the following requirements;

Completed all requirements for an associates, bachelors, masters, professional, doctorate, vocational, or technical degree or certificate from a qualifying educational institution within the previous two (2) years; or

Individuals who, due to military service obligation, were precluded from applying to the Recent Graduates Program during any portion of the 2-year eligibility period described above shall have a full 2-year period of eligibility upon release or discharge from active duty. This eligibility period cannot extend more than 6 years from the date on which the requirements for the academic course of study were met.

In addition to meeting the eligibility requirements above, applicants must possess the experience requirements as follows:

For the GS-07 level: One full-time year (12-months) of specialized work experience equivalent in difficulty and responsibility to the GS-5 level in the Federal service or private sector, that equipped me with the particular knowledge, skills and abilities to perform successfully the duties of this position, and that is typically in or related to the work of the position to be filled. My experience demonstrates planning, organizing, directing, and controlling an agricultural business enterprise; or providing financial, operational, or managerial assistance to an agricultural business; or reviewing and analyzing agricultural marketing studies.

-OR-

Superior Academic Achievement: Completion of all academic requirements for a bachelor's degree in any field which meets one of the following: 1. Class standing: A standing in the upper third of the graduating class or major subdivision, such as a school of agriculture or school of business at the time of application; 2. Grade-point average (GPA): A grade point average of 3.0 or higher out of a possible 4.0 ("B" or better) as recorded on the official transcript, or as computed based on 4 years of education, or as computed based on courses completed during the final 2 years of curriculum; or A grade point average of 3.5 or higher out of a possible 4.0 ("B+" or better) based on the average of the required courses completed in the major field or the required courses in the major field completed during the final 2 years of curriculum. 3. Election to membership in a national scholastic honor society (other than freshmen societies) that meet the requirements of the Association of College Honor Societies.

-OR-

One full academic year (18 semester hours) of progressively higher level graduate education or master's or equivalent graduate degree from an accredited college or university. Related degrees may include agriculture, agricultural economics, farm management, agronomy, horticulture, economics, business administration, mathematics, law or any other field directly related to the position and that demonstrates the knowledge, skills and abilities necessary to perform the work;

-OR-

A combination of education and experience listed above.

For the GS-9 level: One year of specialized experience at the next lower grade level (GS-7) in the Federal service or private sector equivalent that demonstrates a fundamental knowledge of programs, policies, procedures and regulations applicable to crop production, crop insurance, insurance, farming, agriculture, agriculture cycle and trends, and/or agricultural risk management practices, with skill in applying analytical and evaluative techniques for the identification, consideration, and resolution of issues or problems of a procedural or factual nature.

Figure 26: Qualification by various GS levels in a detailed job announcement (USAJOBS, n.d.-c)

In addition to the qualifications, the Requirements section will include the conditions of employment and required documentation, such as college transcripts or special certifications. Lastly, there may be additional information about the role, including details on promotions, telework and relocation incentives.

Assessment Questionnaires. After reviewing the qualifications, the next step is one that many applicants miss. Most job postings include a link to the Assessment Questionnaire but it can be difficult to find. These questions will give applicants an even better understanding of the role and how qualified they are. To find the link to the questionnaire, navigate back to the "how you will be evaluated" section. Typically, the link is there, as shown in Figure 27.

How You Will Be Evaluated

You will be evaluated for this job based on how well you meet the qualifications above.

Applicants who meet basic minimum qualifications will be placed in one of three categories: Best Qualified, Well Qualified, or Qualified. Within these categories, applicants eligible for veteran's preference will receive selection priority over nonveterans. Category placement will be determined based on applicants' quality of experience and the extent they possess the following knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA) or competencies:

Note: If after reviewing your resume and/or supporting documentation, a determination is made that you have inflated your qualifications and or experience, your score may be adjusted to more accurately reflect your abilities, or you may be found ineligible. Please follow all instructions carefully. Errors or omissions may affect your rating. Providing inaccurate information on Federal documents could be grounds for non-selection or disciplinary action up to including removal from the Federal service.

Clicking the link below will present a preview of the application form; i.e. the online questionnaire. The application form link below will only provide a preview and does not initiate the application process. To initiate the online application process, click the "Apply" button to the right.

To view the application form, visit: <https://apply.usastaffing.gov/ViewQuestionnaire/12061597>

Figure 27: Link to assessment questionnaire (USAJOBS, n.d.-c)

Generally, the Questionnaire Assessment is a combination of eligibility and assessment questions related to the SKAs. Many of the eligibility questions are “yes/no” questions and the assessment questions are multiple choice. As noted in the instructions, “your resume and the responses you provide to this assessment questionnaire will be used to determine if you are among the best qualified for this position.” This may sound daunting but remember, if an applicant meets the qualifications for the position and aligned their resume to match, they will likely be a top candidate. Below, Figure 28 shows some examples of assessment questions.

Tip!

As an applicant, it's recommended to “score” oneself against the multiple-choice assessment questions. There are typically 5 choices and applicants can give themselves a score of 0-4 depending on their answer.

For example, if an applicant has no experience with a certain competency, the score would be 0 but if the highest option applies to them, the score would be 4. Do this for each question and tally up the points at the end. This will give applicants a sense of how qualified they are for the position compared to other applicants.

-Pam Berland Ex,
Career Coach for Federal and International Affairs Jobs

Assessment 1

Please respond to the following questions. Any experience claimed in response to the questions MUST be supported by information in your resume. This information must be SPECIFIC, (i.e., duties, responsibilities, and accomplishments). Failure to provide supporting documentation may result in an ineligible rating.

1. Are you a Recent Graduate that has completed all the requirements for an academic course of study leading to a qualifying degree from an accredited educational institution recognized by the U.S. Department of Education within the previous two years OR I am a veteran that completed all the requirements for an academic course of study within the previous six years?

- A. Yes, I have completed all the requirements for an academic course of study leading to a qualifying degree in agriculture, agricultural economics, farm management, agronomy, horticulture, economics, statistics, actuarial science, or any other field directly related to the position from an accredited educational institution within the preceding two years. OR I am a veteran that completed all the requirements for an academic course of study leading to a qualifying degree from an accredited educational institution, but due to a military service obligation, I was unable to apply within the two-year time frame, but it has been no more than six years since I have completed my qualifying degree.
- B. No, I do not meet the above requirement.

2. From the descriptions below, choose the response that best describes the highest level of experience and/or education you have that demonstrates your ability to perform GS-7, Risk Management Specialist work. (Note: One year of specialized experience is based on a 40-hour work week. If you have worked less than 40 hours per week, you must prorate your experience.)

- A. I have Superior Academic Achievement from an accredited college or university with a bachelor's degree in agriculture, agricultural economics, farm management, agronomy, horticulture, economics, statistics, actuarial science, or any other field directly related to the position to be filled with either: 1) a grade point average (GPA) of 3.0 based on a 4.0 scale; 2) a 3.5 GPA based on a 4.0 scale for required courses completed in a major field of study during the last two years of undergraduate study; 3) class standing of upper third of the graduating class in the college, university, or major subdivision of the college; 4) membership in a National Scholastic Honor Society certified by the Association
- B. I have one full year of graduate level study with a major in a field of study in agriculture, agricultural economics, farm management, agronomy, horticulture, economics, statistics, actuarial science, or any other field directly related to the position to be filled.
- C. I have at least one full-time year of specialized work experience equivalent in difficulty and responsibility to the GS-5 level in the Federal service. Specialized experience is experience evaluating and analyzing programs, policies, procedures and regulations applicable to crops, agriculture, agriculture cycle and trends, insurance, statistics, and/or risk management practices. Experience may have been gained in organizing and controlling an agricultural business enterprise; or providing financial, operational, or managerial assistance to an agricultural business; or reviewing and analyzing agricultural, insurance, or statistical data.
- D. I have less than the full amount of graduate education described in "B" and less than the amount of the experience described in "C," but I have a combination of the type of education described in "B" and the type of experience described in "C".
- E. I do not possess the required education and/or experience to qualify for this position.

Figure 28: Assessment questionnaire questions (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2023b)

Tip!

When applying to positions, applicants should check their email Spam folders for correspondence from federal agencies regarding assessment methods and documentation.

- Junell Norris,
Human Resources Specialist with the
National Park Service

The Assessment Questionnaire may seem challenging but they provide an opportunity for applicants to self-declare how their experience qualifies them for a position. It's also an opportunity to showcase competencies that they have, even if they don't have extensive experience. Applicants should also note that, while assessment questionnaires are common, some agencies may use alternative methods (e.g. essay questions) that applicants will need to complete.

"[The assessment] is the place where you are self declaring what your competency is. I have educational training doing this. I have been supervised doing this. I have supervised others doing this or I am usually the person to lead the training...If you have done this task more than once or twice, you've done it. Don't beat yourself up about it. If you've done it, you've done it."

- Jillian Dy
Federal Employee
Agricultural Marketing Service

"If you trained somebody one time, you've trained people...so put that in your resume."

- Michelle Williams
Human Resources Specialist, USDA

Duties. After the assessment questionnaire, the next step is to review the duties of the position, typically listed at the top of the page. Many applicants will start with this section, but applicants may understand it better after they have reviewed the qualifications. The duties section will provide applicants a better understanding of the day-to-day tasks for the role. Figure 29 shows an example of the duties section of a job announcement.

"Most people will think that [duties] is the first thing that they should look at because it's what they will do in the job and it's right at the beginning of the announcement. But what duties means is what you will do once you get to the position...if you've already done some of these things, obviously you add it to your resume. But it's not necessarily the expectation that you will already have done these things."

- Pam Berland Ex
Career Coach for Federal
and International Affairs Jobs

[Help](#)

Duties

- Expands and improve the crop insurance program throughout the region using various resources by staying abreast of agricultural developments and conditions.
- Assess the need and interest for agricultural risk management tools for producers of specific agricultural commodities.
- Research, assemble and release crop insurance actuarial materials (rates, coverage levels, prices, program dates, codes).
- Participate in rating determinations. Utilize agricultural principles, concepts, methods and practices to ensure compliance with actuarial soundness statutes.
- Promote a positive, constructive and solid interpersonal relationship with supervisor, professional staff and peers and treats internal and external customers with courtesy and tact.

Figure 29: Duties listed in a detailed job announcement (USAJOBS, n.d.-c)

Required Documents. In this section, applicants can confirm the documentation required for the role. Details for resumes and other documents are included so applicants should be sure to read through each item carefully. It is very important that all documents are submitted with the application as missing documentation may automatically categorize an applicant as ineligible for the position.

"I recommend if you have any questions about the job announcement, call the contact person. I don't care what kind of question it is. That's what we're there for and we may be able to answer some questions you're confused about."

- Michelle Williams
Human Resources Specialist, USDA

How To Apply. This section will provide additional guidelines on how to successfully submit an application and will also include contact information for someone in the agency, typically an HR Specialist. If there are questions about the job announcement, including qualifications and eligibility requirements, applicants should reach out to the contact person.

2.3 Submitting Applications on USAJOBS

Before submitting an application, applicants should ensure they have a full understanding of the role, their eligibility, qualifications and how to apply. Below is a checklist applicants can review to ensure they are ready to apply:

- Confirm they are eligible to apply for the role
- Confirm the GS level(s) for which they should apply
- Understand the KSAs for the role and how applicants will be evaluated
- Review the Assessment Questionnaire for the role
- Update federal resume
- Understand the duties for the role
- Find the contact information for the role
- Have all other necessary documentation (cover letter, transcripts, etc)

Once ready, applicants can navigate to the top of the job announcement and select the “Apply” button, located in the top right corner.

Next, applicants will complete a series of steps to upload their resume and other documentation and fill out any other required information, including the Assessment Questionnaire. Figure 30 shows the typical steps of submitting an application.

Note that applications can be edited up until the job announcement close date, but sometimes require the entire application to be resubmitted. The “help” section on USAJOBS has more information on editing applications.

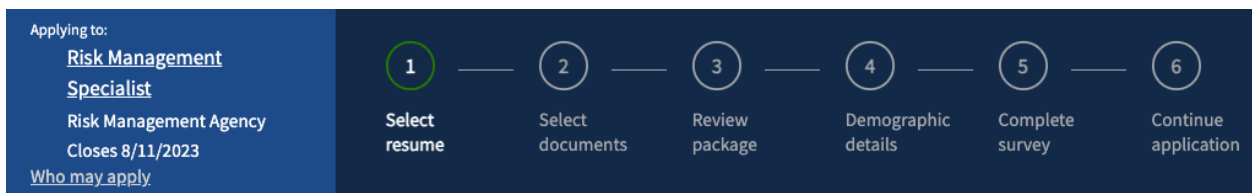


Figure 30: Steps in the application process (USAJOBS, n.d.-f)

SECTION 3: POST APPLICATION - APPLICATION TRACKING AND CANDIDATE EVALUATION

Once the job announcement closes, the agency will begin the process of reviewing applications and categorizing candidates. Applicants can track the status of their

application on USAJOBS and will receive notifications throughout the evaluation process, including when a hiring selection has been made.

3.1 Tracking applications.

Once an application is submitted, applicants can track its status in USAJOBS. To see the dashboard, applicants must click on their name in the top right corner of the homepage. The dashboard shows the number of applications, saved jobs and saved searches, as shown in Figure 31.



Figure 31: Application dashboard on USAJOBS (USAJOBS, n.d.-f)

The timing of the evaluation process may vary depending on when the job closes, how many applicants there are and other factors. However, the agency may be in touch after the following points in the application process (Go Government, n.d.-d):

- When the application is received
- When someone meets the minimum qualifications for the role
- When the application is referred to the agency official for candidate selection
- When a candidate is offered the position

3.2 Evaluating Candidates

After an application is submitted on USAJOBS, it is automatically sorted based on the answers to the assessment questionnaire. However, most applications are still reviewed by hand by a Human Resources Specialist and categorized further. For many agencies, incomplete applications will be automatically removed from consideration (for example, if the applicant did not submit required documentation or did not certify that their information was accurate in the Assessment Questionnaire).

"The [score] is calculated in the system, based on the questions that you answer. There's a score for each question and the system calculates whether you have a 90 or a 95 or a 100. It's all based on how you answer each assessment question...and the best qualified are the ones that we're going to look at first."

- Michelle Williams
Human Resources Specialist, USDA

Using a process called delegation and examining, Human Resources specialists will review applicants and categorize them as Best Qualified, Well Qualified and Qualified.

Candidates who are deemed ineligible or unqualified for the role will be notified, often via email. After the full assessment, which will take into account the information included in the resume and other documentation, qualified candidates will be sent to a hiring official. They will decide how many candidates to interview for the role and then make a selection.

SECTION 4: INTERVIEWING FOR FEDERAL ROLES

If an applicant is categorized as a top candidate, they may be contacted by the hiring agency for an interview. Once a date is set, a hiring official may conduct interviews in a variety of ways including panel interview, in-person, by video or by phone (Go Government, n.d.-c). When candidates are selected, they will be given a tentative job offer which means the candidate is hired for the role provided they complete the final parts of the process, which typically includes a background check and security clearance.

4.1 Federal Job Interviews

If an applicant has received notice for an interview, it's likely they are included in a list of eligible candidates (called a certificate of eligibles), but they will be competing for the position against other qualified candidates. Being prepared for a federal interview will boost their chances of being selected and receiving a tentative job offer. Below are some tips to help applicants prepare for federal interviews.

"Getting on the certificate of eligibles is no guarantee that you'll get an interview. But what it does tell you, and I think this is valuable for students to understand, it shows you that you have been evaluated to be in the upper percentage of your peers who are applying for these kinds of jobs so...keep applying."

- Pam Berland Ex
Career Coach for Federal
and International Affairs Jobs

Types of Federal Interviews. There are two main types of federal interviews: one-on-one interviews and panel interviews (Go Government, n.d.-c). The hiring official, with support from Human Resources, will determine which type of interview format to use and depending on the location and scheduling logistics, may be in-person or virtual. While these types of interviews are the most common, some agencies may also conduct interviews at events like career fairs (Go Government, n.d.-c). Regardless of the type of interview, applicants should be prepared.

4.2 Preparing for Interviews

Federal interviews may seem intimidating but if properly prepared, applicants will feel more comfortable and confident. Outlined below are the main ways to prepare for and succeed during a federal interview.

Conduct research on the hiring agency. Once contacted about an interview, candidates should conduct research on the specific agency that posted the position. For example, if the position is with the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) within the USDA, they should focus on researching FNS rather than the USDA as a whole. Applicants should visit the agency's website and social media to learn about the history of the agency, mission, leadership, and current projects.

"Advice that I've given to a lot of students is to research the agency that's hiring you. Focus on that agency...take a look at some of the projects that they've done and some things that interest you."

- Federal Employee, USDA

Leverage the resume. Like most interviews, applicants will likely need to speak to some of the experiences they have listed on their federal resume, as well as the main skills and competencies. Before each interview, candidates should review the job announcement and identify where their resume best shows how they meet the qualifications of the job. In addition to work experience, volunteer or leadership experience may add to their qualifications. They should also be prepared to speak to their answers on the Assessment Questionnaire.

"When asking for weaknesses, we're not trying to put you in a bad light. We want to know what your plan is to make that weakness into a strength. Spin it and really use it as a chance to show something about yourself in a positive way."

- Federal Employee, USDA

Strengths and weaknesses. Other things to prepare are strengths and weaknesses, which is a common interview question. For strengths, applicants should think about the skills and competencies that they are particularly good at. What is a skill they worked to build and are now confident in? What is a skill they helped someone else build? For weaknesses, applicants should not just note a skill in which they are not proficient, they should think about how they are trying to improve that skill.

Prepare interview questions. For all federal interviews, candidates should come prepared with questions. Remember, while the interview is for the agency to decide who they want to hire for the role, it's also for candidates to learn about the position and ensure they fully understand it. Being prepared with questions

can clear up any confusion about the position and how one can advance their career through federal employment.

For most candidates, the types of questions they should ask will fall into two general categories:

- Questions about the roles and responsibilities:
Are all duties clear? What does the day-to-day look like?
- Questions about growth:
What does the growth and development path look like? Are their opportunities to gain new skills? Is professional development offered?

These are good questions for candidates to ask the hiring official during the formal interview. However, questions regarding pay, benefits, grade levels and other administrative questions should be directed to the Human Resources Specialist.

The STAR Interview Model. Many federal agencies use the STAR model to write interview questions, so candidates should be prepared to answer questions in this format. STAR stands for Situation, Task, Action, and Result. This method is commonly used in all types of interviews as it “prompts you to tell a meaningful story about your work experience without rambling or going off on a tangent” (Adam, 2023, para. 3). For both interviewer and interviewee, this method can be beneficial to asking good questions and getting good responses.

With the STAR model in mind, candidates can use their resumes and the job announcement to craft a few scenarios where they can succinctly show how they used particular skills and competencies to achieve a desired result. Following the STAR method, candidates should first identify the situation they were in and the tasks they were required to achieve, then the actions they took and what the result was. The end result will ideally be quantifiable or described as having a measurable impact. Having a handful of STAR examples can help candidates highlight how they have had an impact in the past and what skills they are capable of demonstrating.

It's not uncommon for federal agencies to use STAR questions in their interviews, for both behavioral and situational questions. Hiring officials may also use STAR questions to probe deeper into a candidate's experience or build on another question. Below are some examples of STAR questions from the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (n.d.-k):

- **Example Question 1: Behavior Question**
Describe a situation in which you dealt with individuals who were difficult, hostile, or distressed. Who was involved, what specific actions did you take, and what were the results?
- **Example Question 2: Situational Question**
A very angry client walks up to your desk. She says she was told your office sent her an overdue check 5 days ago. She claims she has not received the check. She says she has bills to pay, and no one will help her. How would you handle this situation?
- **Example Question 3: Probe Question**
What do you consider to be the most critical issues in this situation?

Preparing for the STAR model can give applicants confidence during federal interviews and help answer many questions in ways that will help them stand out against other candidates.

SECTION 5: RECEIVING AN OFFER AND STARTING A FEDERAL JOB

Getting an official offer for a federal role is a huge moment for a candidate! After the interview process, the hiring agency will conduct a final assessment of all applicants and make a selection for the role (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2017). Human Resources will then reach out to the candidate with a Tentative Job Offer. This offer is contingent on a subsequent investigation of the candidate that is necessary for all federal positions. This includes background checks and security clearances, which may take several days or weeks to complete depending on the candidate and the level of clearance required.

5.1 The Tentative Job Offer

It may take 2-3 weeks, or more, for a candidate to hear back after an interview, but this is completely normal for most federal jobs. The agency will spend that time completing all other interviews, checking references, and making their selection, which is then submitted to Human Resources. Human Resources will then take a few days to compile the job offer for the selected candidate and notify other candidates that they were not selected. Figure 32, below, shows an example of a tentative job offer, usually sent via email.

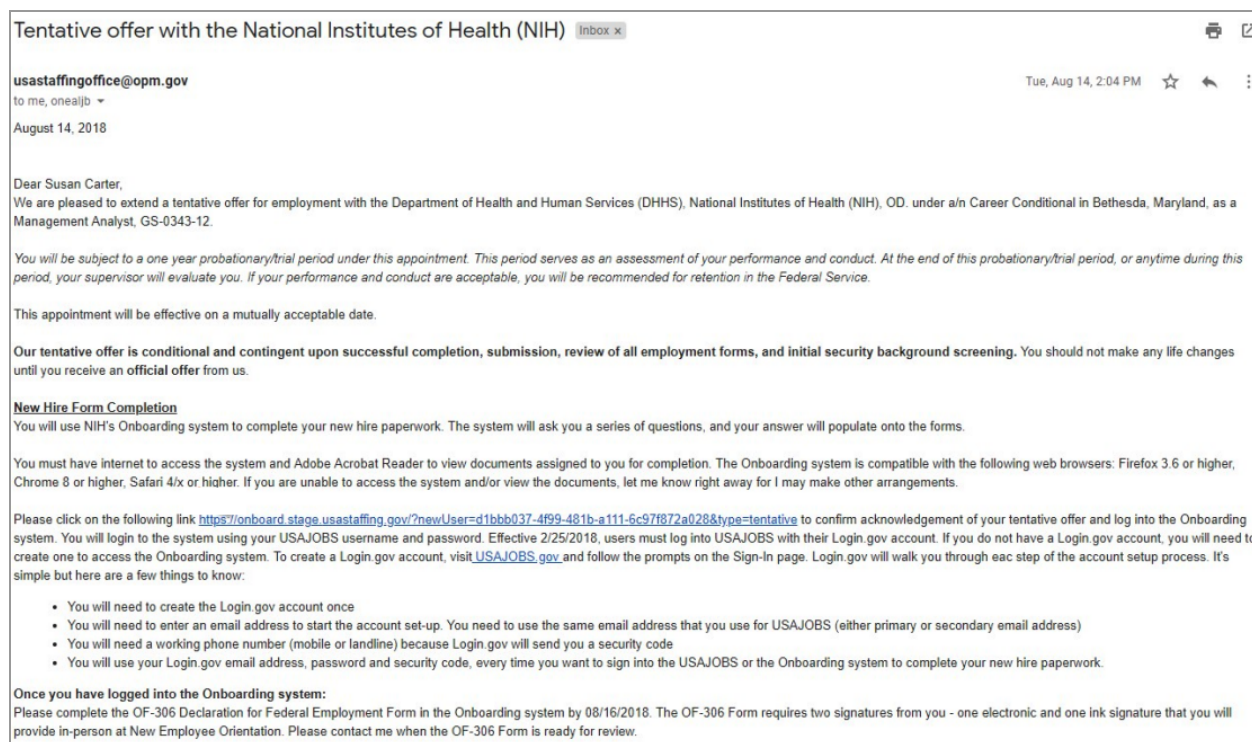


Figure 32: Tentative job offer (National Institute of Health, 2020)

After receiving an offer, the candidate will be able to click a link within the email notice and review the offer in detail and confirm their acceptance of the role. Once a candidate accepts a position, a security process is kicked off, which includes standard background checks and any additional security clearance that the position requires.

5.2 Investigation and Clearance

Depending on the position and whether it is considered sensitive or non-sensitive, the agency (or OPM on behalf of the agency) will conduct all necessary background security checks (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, n.d.-b). For the candidate, this often requires additional forms to be filled out and there may be requests for additional information by the agency or the security office. The full investigation varies by role but may consist of the following (Yale Law School, n.d.).

- ✓ FBI check of former employers and various contacts
- ✓ Credit, tax and police records check
- ✓ Conflicts of Interest
- ✓ Verification of employment and educational history
- ✓ Citizenship Requirements and Dual Citizenship
- ✓ Illegal drug use and other ethical considerations

5.3 Official Offer and Orientation

After the security clearance is complete, the agency will offer the selected candidate an official offer. Once the letter is signed and a start date is confirmed, the final step of the hiring process is complete. The newest federal employee will then start in their new position by attending an orientation.

Conclusion

There is a greater opportunity to change the system when you are a part of it.

The systems in place within federal hiring were built on a history of policies and laws that evolved over time and continue to affect procedures today. The policies and laws have kept the federal workforce consistent, but generally stagnant. The general trust of the American public on the government has been weak, but the trust of younger citizens in the government is even lower. In order to shape the federal workforce into one that is reflective of the American public, younger generations need to seize this opportunity of change.

In a few years, a third of the federal workforce will be eligible for retirement, potentially vacating over 600,000 federal jobs. This is a huge opportunity for younger people to step up as the next generation of the federal workforce. Aside from the typical benefits of federal employment (healthcare benefits, retirement plan, flexible work arrangements, and career advancement and mobility, etc.), the future of the federal workforce is increasingly invested into by the government. In 2023, EO 14035 released and initiated a government-wide diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility strategic plan involving the partnership of OPM and federal agencies (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2023a). This plan increased the availability of paid internships, fellowships, and apprenticeships which open up federal doorways for the younger generation.

We hope to inspire and encourage younger generations to seek federal employment because there is a great amount of value for themselves and for the public they will serve. The guide prepared in this research report is a complete tool for prospective federal job seekers to use to get started on their federal journey.

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Appendix

Appendix A

IRB Approval/Exemption



EXEMPTION GRANTED

Kathleen Merrigan
 GFL-GIOSI: Swette Center for Sustainable Food Systems
 -
 Kathleen.Merrigan@asu.edu

Dear [Kathleen Merrigan](#):

On 6/5/2023 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	Navigating USAJOBS: How to Successfully Secure a Position with a Federal Agency
Investigator:	Kathleen Merrigan
IRB ID:	STUDY00018114
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AMSL Capstone USAJOBS_Model Short Consent_May 2023.docx.pdf, Category: Consent Form; • IRB Application_Navigating USAJOBS_Social Behavioral Protocol_REVISED 06052023.docx.pdf, Category: IRB Protocol; • Supporting Documentation_5-29-2023 (1).pdf, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions);

The IRB determined that the protocol is considered exempt pursuant to Federal Regulations 45CFR46 (2)(ii) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation (low risk) on 6/5/2023.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

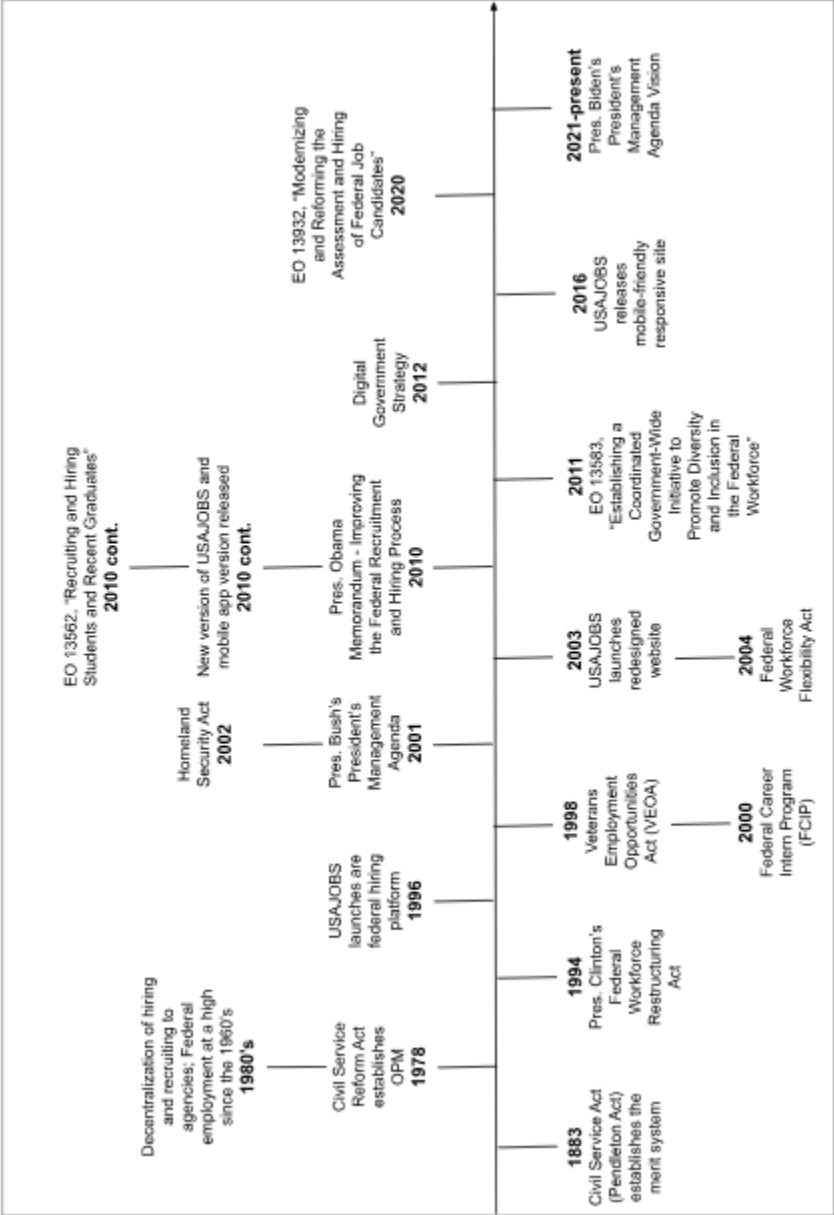
Appendix B

List of Research Study Participants Identified Based on Consent

Name	Title	Organization	Expertise
Roseanna Ciarlante	Director, Hiring Experience Group	Office of Personnel Management	Improving the federal hiring experience
Anonymous	Anonymous	Office of Personnel Management	Customer Experience with USAJOBS, Presidential Management Fellow
James Feeley	Senior Human Resources Specialist	Environmental Protection Agency	Federal recruiting
Junell L. Norris	Human Resources Specialist	National Park Service, DOI	Federal classification, Hiring Process
Anonymous	Anonymous	Food and Nutrition Service, USDA	Workforce planning, hiring process, Veteran
Michelle Williams	Human Resources Specialist	Farm Production and Conservation, USDA	End to end hiring process
Anonymous	Anonymous	Agricultural Research Service, USDA	Recruiting students and recent graduates, HACU, hiring process, federal interviews, Veteran
Pamela Berland Ex	Career Counselor for Federal and International Affairs Jobs	Foreign Service Institute	Federal recruiting, building federal resumes, federal career counseling
Jillian Dy	Agricultural Marketing Specialist	Agricultural Marketing Service, USDA	Using USAJOBS to apply for federal roles, interviewing for a federal position
Kate Seybold	Regional Marketing Specialist	Minnesota Department of Agriculture	Working in the public sector
Nick Benard	Senior Research Specialist	Arizona State University	Using USAJOBS to apply for federal roles

Appendix C

Timeline of Policies, Laws, and Their Influence on Federal Hiring and Recruitment Processes



Appendix D

Fifteen Cabinet Departments of the Executive Branch. (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2018)

Seal	Cabinet	Year Founded	Number of Employees (approx.)
	Department of State	1789	10,000
	Department of the Treasury	1789	79,000
	Department of Defense	1947	90,000 <i>(excludes active-duty service members and the National Guard)</i>
	Department of Justice	1870	112,000
	Department of the Interior	1849	50,000
	Department of Agriculture	1862	106,000
	Department of Commerce	1903	38,000
	Department of Labor	1913	15,000
	Department of Health and Human Services	1953	80,000
	Department of Housing and Urban Development	1965	8,000
	Department of Transportation	1967	54,000
	Department of Energy	1977	14,000
	Department of Education	1979	4,000
	Department of Veterans Affairs	1989	342,000
	Department of Homeland Security	2002	173,000

Appendix E

2023 Grade Level Salary Rates (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2023b)

**SALARY TABLE 2023-GS
INCORPORATING THE 4.1% GENERAL SCHEDULE INCREASE
EFFECTIVE JANUARY 2023**

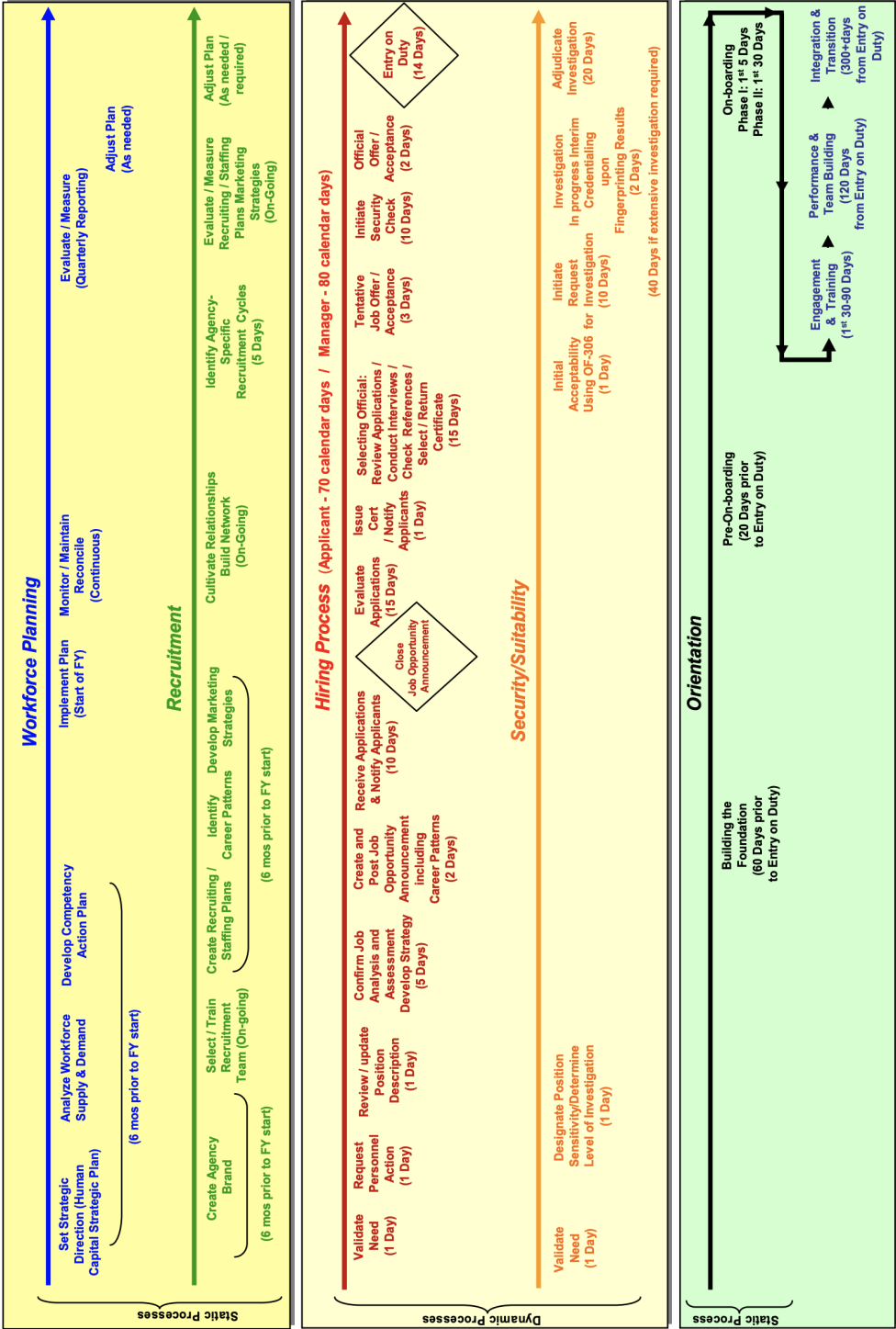
Annual Rates by Grade and Step

Grade	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5	Step 6	Step 7	Step 8	Step 9	Step 10	WITHIN GRADE AMOUNTS
1	\$ 20,999	\$ 21,704	\$ 22,401	\$ 23,097	\$ 23,794	\$ 24,202	\$ 24,893	\$ 25,589	\$ 25,617	\$ 26,273	VARIES
2	23,612	24,174	24,956	25,617	25,906	26,668	27,430	28,192	28,954	29,716	VARIES
3	25,764	26,623	27,482	28,341	29,200	30,059	30,918	31,777	32,636	33,495	859
4	28,921	29,885	30,849	31,813	32,777	33,741	34,705	35,669	36,633	37,597	964
5	32,357	33,436	34,515	35,594	36,673	37,752	38,831	39,910	40,989	42,068	1,079
6	36,070	37,272	38,474	39,676	40,878	42,080	43,282	44,484	45,686	46,888	1,202
7	40,082	41,418	42,754	44,090	45,426	46,762	48,098	49,434	50,770	52,106	1,336
8	44,389	45,869	47,349	48,829	50,309	51,789	53,269	54,749	56,229	57,709	1,480
9	49,028	50,662	52,296	53,930	55,564	57,198	58,832	60,466	62,100	63,734	1,634
10	53,990	55,790	57,590	59,390	61,190	62,990	64,790	66,590	68,390	70,190	1,800
11	59,319	61,296	63,273	65,250	67,227	69,204	71,181	73,158	75,135	77,112	1,977
12	71,099	73,469	75,839	78,209	80,579	82,949	85,319	87,689	90,059	92,429	2,370
13	84,546	87,364	90,182	93,000	95,818	98,636	101,454	104,272	107,090	109,908	2,818
14	99,908	103,238	106,568	109,898	113,228	116,558	119,888	123,218	126,548	129,878	3,330
15	117,518	121,435	125,352	129,269	133,186	137,103	141,020	144,937	148,854	152,771	3,917

Appendix F

Hiring Reform End-to-End Hiring Process Diagram (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, n.d.-j)

The Roadmap - A Comprehensive / Integrated Set of Components



About the Authors

Stephanie Lip

After graduating from Johnson & Wales University with a degree in Culinary Arts & Nutrition, Stephanie moved from New York to Arizona to serve as an inaugural service member with FoodCorps in 2011. Her year of service included hands-on gardening and cooking classes with students and working with school food services to procure and serve local foods, which opened her eyes to the reality of the K-12 food system. Having primarily worked in back-of-the-house positions, Stephanie redirected her experiences to improving service to students in schools. Since then, Stephanie has worked with several school districts in the East and West Coasts, serving in various roles including School Chef with Brigaid and New London Public Schools and School Nutrition Director with Pacific Grove Unified School District. Currently, Stephanie is the Senior School Food Operations Specialist with Chef Ann Foundation, working to support and expand the pipeline for the next generation of school food leaders.

Abigail Martone-Richards

Abigail Martone-Richards is originally from Long Island, NY, and now resides in Jersey City, NJ where she serves on the board of her local Farmers Market, focused on food access initiatives and increasing SNAP utilization. Abigail is passionate about fighting food and nutrition insecurity in her area and connecting urban residents with fresh, sustainably-grown food. Abigail comes from a large family of New England farmers and is looking forward to graduating with her Master's in Sustainable Food Systems and building her career in the industry. Abigail holds a degree in Business Administration from Belmont University in Nashville, TN and was recently the Director of Design Operations at WeWork.

Contact for more information:

Swette Center for Sustainable Food Systems

Email: foodsystems@asu.edu | Website: foodsystems.asu.edu

Swette Center for Sustainable Food Systems is a unit of ASU School of Sustainability