

CHAPTER TWO

CLASSIFICATION AND JOB DESIGN

I want to carry you through managing in federal civil service in a logical sequence that starts with the creation of a job, filling the same job, and then managing the people whom you select. In this chapter, we'll start with the creation of the position, look at your authority to assign duties, and then see how the job gets graded.

As I mentioned in the [Introduction](#), one of the major differences in the federal management system is the fluid position management process. Federal agencies every day create, change, and abolish positions, and while there is a great deal of conventional wisdom and even science about how to best organize duties into positions, there is no orthodoxy in law or regulation.

Take, for example, the issue of span of control—the ratio between the total number of supervisors and hired hands. The conventional wisdom, suggests between 1:7 and 1:8, and there was a big push in the '90s in federal service to make it at least 1:15. However, the reality of it is that I have seen spans of control in federal agencies that ranged between 1:3 and 1:50.

As we talked about in the [Introduction](#), there is no federal agency that approves internal management practices in general or job design in particular within federal agencies. What this means is that agencies have the authority to create any mix of skills or hybrid jobs they wish. Agencies will, of course, have different delegations of authority and internal approvals, but these are wholly within agency discretion.

While this book is primarily about the dynamics of the personnel system, and I don't want to stray too far into the business end of things, I would add my own observation that the best jobs I've seen in federal service were those jobs that were indeed hybrid jobs that required a variety of different skills. Most personnel specialists seem to have fallen for the old 19th century scientific management approach that jobs should perform one specialized function. I have found the opposite is true. The most interesting and motivating jobs are those that do have a mix of different skills—even interdisciplinary. As science fiction writer Robert Heinlein said, "specialization is for insects."

Once a job is created or changed, the major responsibilities and tasks are memorialized in a "position description," or PD. To be honest, PDs are much ado about nothing. A PD is basically a pay document that is intended only to document the major duties that management has assigned, mainly for the

purpose of classifying the job. The PD is not a contract with the employee and is not a limitation on the duties management can assign on a part-time, full-time, or temporary basis. While most federal PDs contain the phrase “and performs other duties as assigned,” even if that phrase were absent, it is well established that federal agencies can require duties not written or even implied in a PD—even without prior notice.

As a practical matter, PD’s serve only two purposes. First, they are used as a tool for grading the job. When a classifier is looking at the job to compare it with the classification standards, the PD is often a major tool because it lists the primary duties. Second, if your agency is going through a major restructuring, they will often use the PD to determine which jobs can be combined or which employees could be displaced into which jobs. However, beyond that, they serve no important purpose, and are only taken seriously by people with small minds.

FEDERAL GRADE STRUCTURE

Where the military has one grading system that has five to nine levels in four different categories, the federal civil service has many different classification systems with different levels. However, most federal jobs are what they call General Schedule (GS) or Wage Grade (WG). The essential difference is that GS jobs are white collar and WG are blue collar.

The distinction, however, is not perfect and many jobs fall into the grey area and many GS jobs, like firefighters, do not wear white collars and do indeed get their hands dirty. GS grades go from 1 to 15 with executive positions above that classified as Senior Executive Service (SES). GS-1 and GS-2 jobs are virtually non-existent, usually high school student aides who have to pass a rigorous pre-employment test of having a mirror placed under their noses, and if it fogs up they get the job, and if it doesn’t, somebody calls an ambulance. GS-3 and GS-4 are usually clerical, GS-5 through GS-7 are either entry-level professional or technicians. GS-9 through GS-12 are typically journeyman professionals and above that are either super-professionals or managers. Supervisors could be any grade, but are usually a grade or two higher than the employees they supervise.

WHAT DOES AND DOES NOT COUNT

The Office of Personnel Management governs position classification in federal service and writes classification standards that describe in detail exactly how specific jobs are graded. Dozens of different classification systems exist in federal agencies: the FDIC has its own system, the Naval Postgraduate school has its own, and many of the Navy labs and warfare centers have their own system.

However, what they all have in common is that they grade jobs based on these

factors:

FACTORS THAT AFFECT GRADE

Knowledge Required to do the Job Successfully

Probably the most heavily weighted factor is the knowledge required. If a tour guide at one of the Civil War battlefields run by the Park Service were required to have only elementary knowledge of the battle and landmarks of the battlefield, the job would be classified at a lower grade. On the other hand, if the job required Ph.D. level knowledge of not only the battle, but of the ante-bellum South and the Civil War, you'd have the job graded much higher.

Authority You Give the Position

What decisions and commitments can the employee make on behalf of your agency? If the employee could, for example, commit large sums of money without higher approval, it would probably weigh heavily for higher grade. On the other hand, if the employee could not order a pencil without the approval of a higher authority, that would lower the grade of the job.

How Closely You Will Guide and Review the Work

Supervisory control is another important classification factor. If the employee functions fairly independently, sets his or her own priorities, and submits work products only cursorily reviewed, that will help raise the grade. However, if the supervisor prioritizes every work assignment, gives detailed guidance on every product, and carefully reviews and evaluates every completed product, that will serve to lower the grade.

Guidelines Available About the Work

Does the employee have a book or SOP's that clearly lay out every step in the process, or does the employee have to invent procedures and create solutions without precedent help? The more inventive the employee has to be, the higher will be the grade.

Complexity of the Work

How complicated is the work compared with other equivalent jobs? BIA police officers are usually more highly graded than other uniformed police officers in the federal government because the work they do is significantly more complicated. Even though the basic skills are the same—patrolling, responding to calls, making traffic stops, rousting drunks, writing reports—jurisdiction in Indian country is an incredibly complicated issue that depends on the nature of the offense, the tribal status of the offenders and victims, and several other

factors that can be a nightmare to sort out and figure out who gets custody over whom.

Whom Will the Person Be Dealing With and Why

They call this nature and purpose of contacts—whom does the job deal with. If the employee is dealing every day with high ranking dignitaries, that would be a grade-enhancing feature. On the other hand, if the only purpose of the dealings were to show the people the directions to the bathroom, that would militate against the grade.

Leadership Elements

These factors we've been discussing only apply to nonsupervisory jobs. Supervisory positions are classified under entirely different criteria. However, even though an employee might not be officially classified as a supervisor because he or she supervises too few people, the fact that the employee supervised a technician or was an ad hoc team leader would be a classification factor.

Difficult Environmental Factors

Physical demands and the work environment are a factor in all classification systems, but in significantly varying degrees. In blue-collar jobs, such factors are given great weight. However, in other jobs they count little. For example, in the standards used to grade wildland firefighters, the fact that they're out in 110° heat, breathing in toxic fumes, schlepping up to 60-pound packs, and doing back-breaking work adds only an insignificant number of points to the numerical scores used to grade them.

FACTORS THAT DO NOT COUNT

There are factors, however, that do not count toward the grade of the job:

Amount of Work

How much work somebody does is not a factor in determining grade, except for Air Traffic Controllers. The fact that somebody does twice as much work as somebody else will not get the grade increased.

Difficulty in Hiring

The fact that you cannot fill jobs at a certain grade is not a reason to raise the grade of the job. Having said that, I should tell you that this principle is violated with impunity throughout federal service. However, the idea is that if there is a labor shortage at a certain grade, you are not supposed to simply raise the

grade of the job. This is why the government allows agencies to seek special salary rates, hiring bonuses, or other incentives.

Competence

An employee's prowess in the job is not a grading factor. If somebody is highly competent, use rewards and even merit raises, but do not simply raise the grade of the job as a reward.

How Somebody Else Is Graded

You will hear this from your employees: "I have a friend who works at Department of Bureaucratic Oppression and she does the same thing I do, but she is two grades higher." The answer, cruel though it may sound, is, "then go get a job at Department of Bureaucratic Oppression." Jobs are supposed to be graded against OPM standards, not against one another and the fact that some other agency has misclassified a job does not mean that your agency is required to make the same mistake.

The reality, if you're new to government, is that every agency has its own unique philosophy it applies to classification. Many, like NASA, Department of Energy, and EPA, are extraordinarily generous. Others, like the National Guard Bureau, are stingy and by the book. More unfair is that all federal jobs within the beltway are badly overgraded—the average federal salary in D.C. is over \$80,000.

NAMING POSITIONS

This is a minor point, but you can use this to some advantage: all federal jobs have two titles—the classification title and the organizational title. The classification title is the official US Government stamp on the position and cannot be changed. FBI agents are officially classified as "criminal investigators," wildland firefighters are officially "forestry technicians," biologists are "fisheries biologists" or "wildlife biologists," and so on.

The second title, the organizational title, is whatever you want to call the employee and is entirely up to you. For example, the FBI and many other federal law enforcement agencies call their agents "special agents," many resource agencies call their biologists "program managers" or similar depictions of their status in the organization. You could call the head of your clerical pool, "Supreme Commander of Allied Clerical Operations for the Western United States," and nobody can say a thing about it.

This is one legitimate way that federal managers give some status to the position, and you may want to think about your organizational titles.

ADDING DUTIES AND UPGRADING POSITIONS

As I've said several times, management has the right to add or remove duties on a permanent or intermittent basis any time it wishes—an important difference from private industry. The only practical consequence is that adding permanent duties might result in changing the classification of the job. Let's take a quick look at what is involved with upgrading positions and in the [next section](#), look at abolishing them.

Your employees will doubtless complain to you that they are under-classified and should be graded higher. Don't take pity on federal employees. The reality of it is that federal employees, while largely overworked, are also overpaid. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics as of 2004, the average federal salary was \$66,558 compared with the private sector average of \$42,635, and that gap increases yearly. Indeed, if you factor in benefits, the overall package for federal employees is \$100,178, almost double the private industry average of \$51,876. The fact is that most jobs in the federal service are either accurately graded or overgraded, and employees who are underclassified and underpaid are as rare as underpaid professional athletes.

I find classification an uncommonly boring topic and do not want to waste any more of your time than absolutely necessarily. However, if you expect to be supervising federal employees for any length of time, I would encourage you to take a few minutes to glance at the classification standards for mainstream federal GS civilian jobs that you supervise. They're right on the Internet (www.opm.gov, and then find the buttons or search that gets you classification standards) and take a look at some mainstream job you supervise. As long as I have been dealing with the federal personnel system, I still find it amazing to see how tough the classification standards are.

Having said that, it is possible for individual positions or groups of positions to be upgraded. The idea is that the job may have changed to such a point that the classification factors are materially enough different to justify a higher grade. For example, I remember a clerical position in a medical office at OPM that logged in disability retirement claims for further review by a physician. They decided, for sound reasons, that it was a waste of a physician's time to review those parts of the claims that did not require medical expertise—ensuring all forms were filled out and signed, verifying the employment status of the claimant, and similar non-medical determinations. So they devolved upon the clerk the responsibilities for basic review of the claims—making sure all the paperwork was there and filled in correctly—without making any value judgment on the type of duty you don't need to be a physician to handle.

Since this raised the knowledge required for the position and the complexity, it had the practical effect of raising the grade. This is the classic upgrade situation.