

# Federal Hiring Gets a Face-Lift

Several years ago, I applied for a job at a federal agency, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). Over the next few months, I spent several hours at seven separate interviews. Seven months later, I received a letter stating that the agency had decided to withdraw the job announcement.

Unfortunately, this experience is all too familiar for federal job seekers. But change may be on the horizon. In May, President Obama issued a presidential directive to executive branch agencies to reform the hiring process and make several necessary improvements. It is important, however, to sound a note of caution: Many administrations have promised hiring reform, and yet the process seems to grow longer and more complex. Furthermore, one of the agencies that President Obama placed in charge of the effort is OMB.

The presidential directive institutes a number of significant reforms. It requires that vacancy announcements be written in more understandable language, rather than the opaque language that dominates announcements on USAJOBS, the federal government's hiring website ([www.usajobs.gov](http://www.usajobs.gov)). For example, a quick browsing of listings for attorney positions on the website pulls up jobs with contradictory descriptions, such as, this position "is responsible for establishing workload priorities and assigning, reviewing, and managing work... Although this position is not supervisory, [it] is part of the ... management team."

The site also lists jobs with indecipherable qualifications, for example, "Professional knowledge and demonstrated skill in researching legal issues raised by requests for formal opinions, the analysis of complex factual situations in light of the results of such legal research and general legal principles, and the preparation of written legal opinions ... ."

A move toward clearer job descriptions is definitely an improvement, as is the elimination of the dreaded "KSAs," the essay questions addressing knowledge, skills, and abilities that are a requirement for most federal job applications. Most announcements require applicants to address questions such as the following: "Describe your ability to work independently while, at the same time, communicating effectively with colleagues and supervisors so that information and input flows easily in both directions."

Answers to these questions usually do not add much to an application, as most of the information is already contained on a résumé. Fortunately, the presidential directive allows individuals to apply for federal jobs simply by submitting a résumé and cover letter.

Another welcome improvement is the use of cat-

egory ratings rather than the traditional means of numerically ranking applicants and selecting one from the top three. This system allows an agency to place applicants into categories such as "best qualified" or "highly qualified" and then choose an applicant from the highest category, giving the agency a wider pool from which to choose. One of the problems with numerical rankings is that the applicants are often rated by human resources officials who have little understanding of the actual duties of the job. This still could be an issue with category ratings; however, the presidential directive requires managers to be more fully involved in the recruiting process and to be appraised on their ability to recruit qualified employees.

Finally, the presidential directive requires OMB and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to develop time lines and targets to improve the quality and speed of agency hiring. This addresses one of the biggest complaints about the federal hiring process: its sluggish pace. Applicants for federal jobs report being asked to interview for jobs for which they no longer remember applying. In fact, I once was called for an interview for a federal job for which I had applied more than a year earlier.

Shortening the hiring process has been tried many times before. In 2004, OPM attempted to speed it up to 45 days, which was more often a goal than a reality. In order to make real progress, agencies must be held accountable for the efficiency of their hiring process. For example, they could be required to report the average length of the hiring process in their annual performance and accountability reports. Obama's presidential directive does have an important component that allows applicants to measure the speed of the process themselves. It requires that agencies notify applicants about the status of their application at key stages throughout the process. This also should diminish the feeling many applicants have that they dropped their résumés in a black hole, never to be seen again.

The presidential directive does make many much-needed improvements, but accountability is critical. If agencies are not held accountable, the ingrained habits of the past will simply continue, leaving many qualified employees frustrated or unwilling to apply for a federal job. In an era in which the federal government is facing so many challenges, it cannot risk losing the best and the brightest employees. **TFL**

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