

The Federal Hiring Process: The Long and Winding Road

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I have been asked to testify about some of the obstacles that face recent graduates, particularly minority students, in obtaining employment with the Federal government. While I speak today about the experience that university students have encountered in this process, I believe that many of the issues identified can easily work to deter other potential job seekers. Attracting the best and the brightest of all racial and ethnic groups to public service is an admirable goal that can only strengthen the Federal government and ultimately reinforce the concept of democracy upon which this government was founded.

The initial goal of any prospective employer is to provide employment and career information that generates interest in the pool of job seekers. The Federal government competes with other public and private sector employers to get their story out. This is a task made more difficult if one believes that shrinking the size of government is an objective of the powers in Washington. The message that government employees can be easily replaced by outside contractors or that the federal bureaucracy is seen as an obstacle to progress does little to generate enthusiasm in pursuing a career with the government.

Federal agencies use a number of programs that are notable as stepping-stones to hire students into full-time permanent employment. The Stay in School Program works with

students as early as high school to encourage them to complete their education and to consider the Federal government as an employer of choice. The Student Temporary Employment Program places students and graduates in temporary positions within the Federal government. Graduates can also use the Outstanding Scholar Program as a supplement to competitive examining for some entry-level positions helping to streamline the hiring process. Unfortunately, not enough students know about these programs and take advantage of their benefits.

Federal agencies use a variety of strategies to recruit students on college campuses including: participation in career fairs, hosting information sessions, providing printed recruitment materials, and some limited advertising in college papers. In addition, there are special initiatives that enhance the recruiting activities of the government such as participation in the Government College Relations Council (GCRC) that seeks to strengthen the partnerships between government and higher education; the Diplomat on Campus Program that places an Ambassador on a university campus to meet and recruit candidates for the U.S. Department of State; and the Partnership For Public Service with its Call to Serve Program which works to publicize careers in the Federal government. The redesigned USA Jobs website has also done much to reach the Internet generation. Notably absent is the on-campus interview, which is an effective tool, used by many employers to identify the best candidates for their positions and organization.

Despite attempts to simplify and streamline the federal hiring process, it remains the biggest obstacle in getting a potential candidate to a job with the Federal government. I

will list some of the hurdles that face candidates in this long and rigorous process. While this process has an adverse effect on most candidates, it places a major obstacle in the path of minority candidates who may not have access to the Internet 24/7, may not know persons able to guide them through the process, or may not be able to wait out the lengthy process due to financial concerns.

The first problem that candidates face is the months that go by from the initial application to the actual hiring by an agency. While there may be perfectly understandable reasons for the delay in hiring, it can place college applicants in a difficult financial situation that discourages some from even applying. There are few things that make a graduate or their parents happier than to have a job offer in hand shortly after graduation. Employers who are able to make offers early in this process frequently grab the best and the brightest and also generate a fair amount of excitement on the campus that helps with their recruitment activities.

Graduates waiting for a hiring decision are faced with living expenses, loans to pay off, and a strong desire to get on with the next chapter in their lives. Many find themselves forced to look for work during this time but are handicapped in this search if they are honest with their prospective employers about their long-term plans. They struggle to get by while many of their friends, who are already employed, are beginning to reap the rewards of their education. The contact between the agency and the applicant, which may be limited, often leaves the applicant with a sense that little or nothing is happening.

Parents or a spouse may be supportive or add to the pressure on the applicant while they sit and wait.

The actual vacancy announcement available on the USA Jobs Internet site is an imposing and comprehensive listing that often intimidates potential applicants. While gathering my thoughts for this testimony, I visited the website and printed off a vacancy announcement for what appears to be an entry-level position. I was rewarded with 11 pages of instructions for a posting that is open for one week. The information is extremely thorough and can be of great use to anyone who reads and follows directions carefully. Unfortunately, for most applicants the vacancy announcement uses terminology not easily understood, requires that their resume be redone to fit federal guidelines, may require written pages in which the applicant describes their knowledge, skills and abilities (KSA's), and in general causes anxiety and frustration. Moreover, one misstep, such as missing documents, in this process and the application is not considered and the applicant is never notified about the results.

Some vacancies are open only to previous Federal government employees or veterans which excludes the majority of college graduates. Others have very short periods of time in which to apply and the applicant either needs have someone on the inside keeping them informed or needs to be in the right place at the right time. The concept of continuous hiring for some vacancies discourages applicants who mistakenly believe that it is a waste of time to apply because there are no jobs currently available.

For those who work through the application process and there are many who do, they may find themselves placed on a certificate list. This list ranks the candidates and is used to determine the order of interviews by the hiring agency. Applicants may or may not get a letter stating that they were placed on this list and usually aren't aware of their place on the list. The onus is on the applicant to contact the human resource person in charge of this hiring process for information about their status. The contact's phone number is listed at the end of the vacancy announcement.

What follows is an extensive but necessary background check that further delays an already lengthy hiring process. Those candidates who are cleared are then ready to start their jobs with the hiring agency. Are they still waiting or have they moved on and taken permanent jobs with another employer?

In short, the process is long and cumbersome. To be honest with you, while there are career services professionals who fully understand the process, there are many others who rarely use it and are not in a position to guide someone through it. Even if our level of expertise about the process was better not every student uses our offices to the extent that we would like to see. Consequently, graduates are often on their own to investigate and navigate the pitfalls of the federal hiring process.

There are many highly qualified and motivated students who would consider working for the Federal government if there were more of a recruitment presence on college campuses. While I understand that government jobs should be open to everyone, I think

that college graduates have particular skills and abilities that make them excellent candidates. Identifying college campuses with diverse student bodies and designing a recruitment plan would help to increase diversity in the federal workforce. It would be good for the students and good for the Nation.