Thinking About a Federal Government Career?

by Michael Ditkoff, A&S ’73 (BA in Economics)

A brief introduction: Who am I?

I am a graduate of the University of Hartford who embarked upon a challenging and successful government career spanning 36 years and three months. My assignments included:

- Citizenship and Immigration Service (March 2004 to March 2010)
  Budget Analyst
- Immigration and Customs Enforcement (March 2003 to March 2004)
  Budget Analyst
- Immigration and Naturalization Service (Dec 1997 to Mar 2003)
  Budget Analyst
- Bureau of the Census (Jan 1974 to Dec 1997)
  Statistician
  Budget Analyst

I began my career as a GS-7 statistician and retired as a GS-14 budget analyst by changing my occupation. I worked in four agencies without losing any benefits. The government covered 60% of my tuition for an MBA degree, and I retired with a great pension and no regrets about my career in public service.

What are some of the benefits of a federal career?

1. Variety!

   Occupations run the gamut from Aerospace Engineering to Zoology. The Handbook of Occupational Groups and Families lists occupations by groups. Examples are Human Resources (job series 0201), Mathematical Sciences (job series 1500), and Accounting and Budget (job series 0500). Occupations inside each group have a specific series number (Remember this number when you’re researching potential roles for yourself!)

2. Great Benefits!

   A. Annual Leave

      The amount of leave is linked to your years of service. As you gain experience, your eligibility for paid annual leave increases according to the following schedule:

      < 3 years: 13 days a year
      ≥ 3 ≤ 15 years: 20 days a year
      >15 years: 26 days a year

      In contrast to most other places of employment, any unused leave rolls over to the next year.
B. Good Health Insurance
Federal employees participate in the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program (FEHB) and can choose from a multitude of health plans. More information may be found here. On average, the government pays 72 percent of the total premium.

C. Retirement
The Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS) consists of three parts: Social Security, a small annuity, and a thrift plan. The government will evenly match 5 percent of your contributions into the thrift plan. The best part is that retirement eligibility is based on FERS rules—not Social Security rules. Even though full (unreduced) Social Security retirement benefits begin at age 67 for those working in the private sector, a federal employee can collect FULL retirement under FERS at age 57!!

More information may be found at the FERS Information Page.

3. Competitive pay.

The pay scale can be found here.

In the past, salaries were uniform throughout the country. A GS-7 accountant in New York was paid the same as a GS-7 accountant in San Francisco. Recognizing that the cost of living is different in the two cities, the Congress authorized an additional payment called locality pay. Each city’s pay scale in the table includes locality pay. Go to “Locality Pay Tables for Geographic Areas” and look for the city in which you wish to work. If you don’t see your desired city, it is included in “Rest of United States,” where there is one pay scale for the rest of the United States, except for Hawaii and Alaska, which have their own pay scales. Click on the icon for “Annual Rate.” There are 15 grades and 10 steps to each grade. Generally, entry level positions begin at the GS-5 level; however, they can be higher. For example, I began my career as a GS-7.

4. Regular promotions.
Occupations have a career ladder in which promotion can occur without competition. I was promoted to the GS-9, 11, and 12 levels without having to compete (file a promotion application.) After reaching the GS-12 level (the top of the career ladder), I had to file an application for a GS-13 vacancy. After promotion to the GS-13 level, I was required to file an application for a GS-14 vacancy in order to be considered for that level.

How do I find a federal job?

Vacancies are listed on the Office of Personnel Management’s jobs website, https://www.usajobs.gov. More extensive information regarding careers in any specific executive branch department or agency may normally be found on that organization’s website.

Good Sources of Information on Federal Government Careers

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