



## UNITED STATES OFFICE OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT

Washington, DC 20415

The Director

Tuesday, February 10, 2004

### MEMORANDUM FOR: Chief Human Capital Officers

FROM: KAY COLES JAMES  
Director

Subject: Ten Things You Can Do To Improve Federal Hiring

Improving the Federal hiring process has been one of my top priorities since I became Director of the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) more than 2 years ago. Working together as a team, we have made steady progress since then, particularly on the legislative front. First proposed by the President in his "Freedom to Manage" initiative, a number of important new hiring flexibilities were enacted by the Congress as part of the Chief Human Capital Officers Act of 2002. These new authorities, coupled with those that have existed for some time, have the potential for dramatically improving our ability to get the right people in the right jobs at the right time.

Many of you have asked me for a quick list of what other actions you could take right away to have an impact within your respective agencies. The ten actions below reflect what some are already doing in their agencies to drive changes in how their agencies conduct hiring and recruitment.

Unfortunately, some agencies are not in a position to take full advantage of these flexibilities. Why? Because many of us suffer from outmoded internal rules and practices (most of which have no basis in law or regulation) that impede our ability to hire the best and brightest. These self-imposed constraints are the reason we continue to hear complaints from job-seekers about the complexity and time involved in getting a Federal position. I have listed below ten things we can do right now, as soon as you finish reading this memorandum, that will go a long way to "fix" Federal hiring...without any new laws or regulations. It is just a matter of doing it!

1. **Eliminate Self-Wrapping Red Tape.** Our studies have shown that many, if not most, of the complications and delays that remain in the Federal hiring process stem from internal agency procedures: excessive layers of approval, redundant reviews, and unnecessary paperwork, based on "we've always done it that way" traditions that no longer have any basis in law or OPM regulations...if they ever did. For example, we have found that it sometimes takes weeks for a manager to get approval to fill a vacancy, and even after the applications are in, there are so many bottlenecks and hand-offs in the personnel office that candidates become discouraged. However, this may also be one of the easiest ways to realize dramatic improvements; it takes commitment from the top, but it can be done. *Assign someone (preferably one of your customers) right now to look at your internal*

*practices, identify those that are based on nothing more than tradition, and get rid of them.*

2. **Use Plain Language in Job Announcements.** Even with all of our modern technology, it is hard to break with the past. Go to USAJOBS and take a look at your vacancy announcements. Tell me if you understand them. Most are pages long and filled with acronyms, legal technicalities, and other arcane terms that only make sense to personnel specialists. Many are also just plain boring, repeating lengthy passages from position descriptions that would confuse all but the most determined of candidates. **You can change them.** *Assign someone right now to monitor and modify your vacancy announcements (preferably before they become public) to ensure that they use plain language and represent your agency the way you deserve to be represented.*
3. **Recruit Veterans.** Our Nation's armed forces are the best in the world, and the dedication and professionalism of the men and women who serve in them are unparalleled. I cannot think of a better source of talent for the Federal Government than those who have completed their service in uniform. Veterans' preference has been a cornerstone of the Federal civil service since its inception. There are special, non-competitive hiring authorities for certain categories of veterans (e.g., veterans' readjustment appointments). *Assign someone right now to establish relationships with the transition offices that the Defense Department has set up for separating service members, match skilled veterans with your agency's needs (OPM's Veteran Invitational Program can help), then recruit them as soon as they become civilians.*
4. **Adopt an Accelerated Hiring Model.** Federal hiring does not need to be a protracted process. OPM developed an accelerated hiring model for Senior Executive Service (SES) positions, among the most complicated to fill. Through this process, OPM rated, ranked, interviewed, and selected two waves of SES hires. Further, for 17 candidates, we selected and hired them from a pool of almost 1,000 high-quality applicants...in 49 days. To achieve this goal, management must make a commitment; my senior team and I invested our time, and we made it happen. *Take a look at your critical vacancies right now and commit the time and resources to get them filled quickly, before you lose that superstar who has been waiting to hear from you.*
5. **Competing on Campus.** As managers, we have the authority to bring in student interns and recent college graduates on the spot, without any protracted competition. Cooperative education and student work-study programs are in place today, and those that successfully complete their requirements (typically a semester of Federal work experience) can be brought on board immediately and placed in a permanent position. The Federal Career Intern Program (FCIP) also allows you to hire recent graduates immediately; all you need is a formal program to train them, and they can be made permanent employees after they have successfully completed it. *Find out right now when your agency's recruiting teams are going to visit college campuses; make sure that they know of these flexibilities and are prepared to use them, and when they get back, follow up to see who they've hired. (See attached memo, "Hiring Students and Recent College Graduates.")*

6. **Offer Incentives for Talent.** Many complain the Federal Government is not competitive when it comes to starting salaries. That is another myth. We can compete, particularly on an individual basis, using recruiting incentives (signing bonuses, relocation expenses, student loan repayments, and superior qualifications appointments) that already exist. Do not let anyone tell you that you cannot afford to use them...remember, the money you save while a position is vacant can be used to fund these incentives. You need never settle for less than the best. *Make sure that your agency's recruiting teams know that they have the authority (and the funding) to offer these incentives, and when they get back from their next recruiting trip, follow up to see how they've done.*
7. **Utilize On-the-Spot Hiring Authority.** Part of the Chief Human Capital Officers Act of 2002, "Direct Hire" authority allows agencies to literally hire on-the-spot to meet mission-critical staffing needs or severe shortages. OPM has provided this authority for a number of categories Government-wide (for example, medical occupations) and has approved several agency requests for occupations unique to their missions. However, we have been surprised at how few agencies requests we have received. *Look at your hiring plans for FY 2004 right now, particularly for mission-critical jobs, identify opportunities to use this authority, determine whether standards in the regulation have been met, and, if so, ask OPM for it. And think about using this authority at one of the regional Federal job fairs that OPM is sponsoring across the country.*
8. **Leverage Other New Hiring Flexibilities.** The Chief Human Capital Officers Act also provided a new method of assessing and selecting job candidates. "Category Rating" eliminates one of the most cumbersome elements of the Federal hiring process, the so-called "rule of three." With category rating, you can place applicants in broad categories according to their qualifications, and then, subject to veterans' preference requirements, select any candidate from within the top group. *Find out right now why your HR offices are not using this streamlined process and get with it. This is another flexibility that is ideal for a job fair.*
9. **Go After Outstanding Scholars.** As part of the consent decree that eliminated the old civil service Professional and Administrative Career Exam, the Outstanding Scholar program allows you to supplement competitive hiring processes for certain entry level positions covered by the decree by hiring college graduates who have a 3.5 grade point average or above or who are in the top 10 percent of their graduating classes. This authority is intended to improve your agency's diversity, although its use should not be limited to any one group. *Educate your HR staff about the appropriate use of this authority.*
10. **Fully Engage Your HR Staff.** Providing sufficient, well-trained HR support will also help. Invest in your HR staff. Provide necessary training and increase staffing levels where needed. *Conduct a skills assessment of your HR office right now (ask some of your customers what they think); it will pay dividends in the long run.*

Separately and together, these ten things will make a difference in our ability as a team to get the right people in the right jobs at the right time, especially if we pay attention to it. We all know what gets measured gets done, and you should apply this principle to the hiring process. *Tell*

*your HR staff right now to begin tracking "time to hire," especially for mission-critical jobs -- from the time a vacancy is identified to when it is actually filled -- and have them report it to you and your senior leadership team.* Demand improvements, especially when it comes to automation, self-imposed procedural delays, and customer service. I have asked my Human Capital Officers to gather this information from each of you and to compare and report it periodically; that way, we can identify best practices and benchmarks that will help us all do better. At the same time, I will continue to look for opportunities to pursue additional hiring flexibilities through legislation as one of OPM's top priorities. Together, we will improve Federal hiring.

If you have any questions, contact your Human Capital Officer at OPM.

cc: Human Resources Directors

[Attachment](#)