

PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

# Mid-Career Hiring

Revisiting the Search for Seasoned Talent in the Federal Government

A REPORT IN THE FEDERAL HIRING SERIES  
SEPTEMBER 2004

The Partnership for Public Service is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to meeting the needs of government by inspiring a new generation to serve and revitalizing government. In its activities and publications, the Partnership focuses its energy on achieving leverage through entrepreneurial partnerships and collaboration. With an emphasis on action, accomplishments and measurable results, it acts as a catalyst for change.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines the federal government's efforts to attract external talent to fill key management and senior specialist positions – an issue that has taken on increased urgency in light of current events.

September 11th prompted the creation of the Department of Homeland Security in 2002, which was the most dramatic restructuring of the federal government since 1947, and the 9/11 Commission Report has made another reshuffling of the boxes appear likely. While these structural reforms are a step in the right direction, their impact is in danger of being minimized due to a failure to adequately address the other side of the good government equation — good people.

The 9/11 Report says it best: “The quality of the people is more important than the quality of the wiring diagrams.”<sup>1</sup> That is why it is imperative that our nation launch a comprehensive effort to get and keep high caliber talent in the federal government at all levels.

Bringing these people into government will require a multi-pronged approach. One of the most practical things we can do to advance this cause is to remove barriers to government service, and perhaps the greatest impediment facing prospective employees is the labyrinth that is the federal hiring process.

This is one in a series of reports by the Partnership for Public Service to identify areas where we can improve federal hiring practices. This report will focus on a specific problem identified by the 9/11 Report: the need to attract talent from outside the government to fill managerial and specialist positions – what are commonly known as “mid-career” federal jobs.

The 9/11 Report specifically cites “the FBI’s tradition of hiring analysts from within instead of recruiting individuals with relevant education background and experience”<sup>2</sup> as one of the reasons we failed to thwart the 9/11 plot. The Report also says one of the overriding issues that must be addressed is that “Imagination is not a gift usually associated with bureaucracies.”<sup>3</sup> Placing people from outside government in federal management positions is an obvious way to inject new ideas and perspectives. But the most compelling case for bringing in new workers from outside government is not the 9/11 Commission Report. It is basic math.

Simply put, the number of mid-career employees who will retire in the coming years will likely exceed the number of promotion-ready candidates who are already in the federal government. All good organizations develop talent from within, and clearly the federal government has done a good job on this front and should continue to make this a priority. But with 430,000 fewer civil servants today than in 1990, and a pending retirement boom, the federal government almost certainly won’t have the “bench strength” to adequately fill these jobs internally.

This report is an update of the 2002 Partnership study, “Mid-Career Hiring in the Federal Government: A Strategy for Change.” Some of the recommendations from the 2002 study have been adopted, in particular the establishment of a Presidential Management Fellows Program to attract more experienced workers to the federal service.

The new study shows that with the help of these and other reforms, the federal government is doing a better job of hiring external mid-career professionals. But there is still room for improvement. Key findings include:

★ ***The hiring of external candidates for mid-career federal jobs is on the rise.*** The number of external hires at the mid-career (GS-12 to 15) level increased from 8,009 in 2000 to 10,485 in 2003. As a percentage, the federal government filled 15.3 percent of its mid-career jobs in 2003 with candidates from outside the government, up from only 10.5 percent of mid-career hires in 2000.

★ ***The federal government has become more efficient in its ability to attract external mid-career candidates.*** In 2003, the federal government managed to hire 2,476 more external candidates for mid-career positions even though fewer jobs were opened up to outside candidates. In 2000, 21,162 vacancies (49 percent) were open to the public. But in 2003, only 15,719 vacancies (43 percent) were open to the public. That means that the federal government has gone from a ratio of 0.38 external hires for each vacancy open to external candidates in 2000 to a ratio of 0.67 external hired per vacancy in 2003.

★ ***Attracting external mid-career candidates requires more than simply opening more jobs to the public.*** The Small Business Administration opened up 97.1 percent of its mid-career jobs to external candidates in 2003 but filled only 4.2 percent of these positions with non-government workers. On the flip

side, the State Department filled 22.8 percent of its mid-career openings with external candidates despite opening up only 30.8 percent of those positions to the public. While opening more mid-career vacancies to a broader audience is part of the solution, this step alone will not close the looming skills gap at the mid-career level.

★ ***The progress that has been made in bringing in new talent at the mid-career level is not enough.*** Despite the progress that has been made, 85 percent of mid-career federal jobs are still filled internally – a rate that cannot be sustained when you consider the expected spike in the number of mid-career retirements.

Recruiting mid-career talent from outside government is hardly the silver bullet to address the federal government's challenges. But just as it is insufficient to focus on the structure of government, and not the personnel, it is not enough to grow management from within while ignoring pools of talent from the outside. It's not either/or. It's both. And this report will further examine what has been and what needs to be done on this front to ensure that federal hiring practices are producing the best mix of people to deliver the effective government services that the American people deserve.

## INTRODUCTION

Mid-career employees are the managers, supervisors and senior specialists who drive the work of federal agencies from the trenches, whether defending our country from terrorist attacks or protecting investors from corporate malfeasance. These professionals, at the top four grades (GS-12 to 15) of the General Schedule pay system, make up 35 percent of the federal workforce.<sup>4</sup> Yet a major demographic transition in the federal workforce is placing increasing stress on this cadre, requiring that federal agencies draw in more non-government candidates to fill these jobs.

Simply put, the number of mid-career employees who will retire in the coming years will likely exceed the number of promotion-ready candidates who are already in the federal government. All good organizations develop talent from within, and clearly the federal government has done a good job on this front and should continue to make this a priority. But with 430,000 fewer civil servants today than in 1990, and a pending retirement boom, the federal government almost certainly won't have the "bench strength" to adequately fill these jobs internally.

The need to attract external talent into the federal workforce has taken on increased urgency in light of the 9/11 Commission Report. The Report specifically cites "the FBI's tradition of hiring analysts from within instead of recruiting individuals with relevant education background and experience," as one of the reasons we failed to thwart the 9/11 plot.

Mid-career hiring from outside government is not only necessary but also desirable. Applicants with significant experience outside government offer fresh perspectives and ideas that can help to maximize effectiveness and productivity.

Looking outside government may also be a powerful tool to improve diversity among agency managers, which is an area in need of attention considering the fact that Hispanics are underrepresented in the civil service, making up 7.0 percent of the federal workforce and filling only 4.3 percent of high-level government jobs.<sup>5</sup> Finally, advertising job openings to external candidates is consistent with the merit principles of "fair and open competition" that lie at the foundation of the federal merit system.<sup>6</sup>

It is important to note that external mid-career hiring should complement, not replace, the prevailing practice within the federal government of "growing" management talent from within.

In 2002, the Partnership released "Mid-Career Hiring in the Federal Government: A Strategy for Change." This study offered a comprehensive look at the federal government's performance in filling mid-career positions with candidates from outside government and offered a series of recommendations for improvement.

A number of these recommendations have already been acted upon. The 2002 report:

- ★ Called for the establishment of a "Presidential Management Fellows" program to expand opportunities for experienced candidates interested in entering federal service at the GS-12 to 15 grade levels. On November 21, 2003, an Executive Order was issued, and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) released draft regulations for the program in January 2004.
- ★ Urged improved advertisement of federal jobs and their benefits. Since then, OPM, in partnership with private sector leader Monster.com, re-launched USAJobs as a "one-stop shop" for all government job openings.

## Mid-Career Hiring

Currently, USAJobs averages roughly 180,000 visits each day, up from about 26,000 a day before the re-design.

- ★ Endorsed the Digital TechCorps Exchange Program, which had been introduced by U.S. Representative Tom Davis (VA), that would allow government and the private sector to “exchange” workers for up to two years. This proposal was signed into law in December 2002, and OPM proposed rules for the program in January 2004.
- ★ Proposed easing rules to facilitate hiring. The Homeland Security Act of 2002 allows OPM to independently identify severe candidate shortages and grant direct hire authority to help agencies dramatically speed up hiring for critical jobs (including mid-career vacancies) and offers a long-awaited alternative to the government’s antiquated “rule of three,” which had constrained the pool of applicants that managers could choose from when filling a vacancy.
- ★ Encouraged federal agencies to expand the number of mid-career positions for which external applicants are given serious consideration. Most agencies subsequently increased

their proportionate intake from the outside for these positions

- ★ Called for the development of more competitive compensation systems. The Departments of Homeland Security and Defense are currently implementing more market-based pay systems for their employees. In addition, Congress recently addressed the pay compression problem for the Senior Executive Service, and OPM has just released rules defining the type of performance management system agencies must have in place to take advantage of this authority to pay SES executives higher salaries.

This update to the 2002 report reveals the impact of these reforms and gives a revised picture of the federal government’s efforts to recruit mid-career talent from outside of government. It also lays out a new set of recommendations on how to do a better job of attracting external candidates for these critically important jobs.

### *A Need for Change: Mid-Career Hiring Needs Likely to Increase*

The impending retirement crunch facing all of government will hit mid-career levels hardest. OPM’s most recent retirement projections reveal

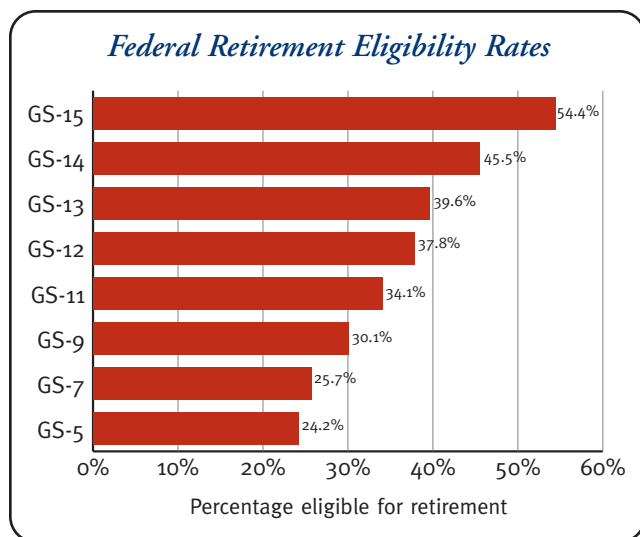
*Projected versus Actual Retirements (All Grades)*

Year	Projected Retirements	Actual Retirements
FY 2001	50,771 (3.7%)	40,285 (2.7%)
FY 2002	51,012 (3.4%)	41,302 (2.8%)
FY 2003	44,305 (2.9%)	50,032 (3.3%)

*Projected versus Actual Retirements (Supervisors)*

Year	Projected Retirements	Actual Retirements
FY 2001	7,958 (4.4%)	7,217 (4.0%)
FY 2002	8,820 (4.8%)	7,805 (4.2%)
FY 2003	6,526 (3.5%)	8,836 (4.7%)

that 31.7 percent of full-time permanent federal employees will be eligible to retire in the next five years.<sup>7</sup> As evident in the graph below, retirement eligibility levels among mid-career workers are even higher.<sup>8</sup>



Retirements at mid-career and senior levels will create thousands of job openings and a corresponding need for talented individuals to fill these positions.

Retirement eligibility, of course, is an incomplete picture. Looking beyond retirement eligibility rates to retirement projections confirms that the attrition rate will present significant challenges.

Data from the Office of Personnel Management indicates that among all federal employees (as well as among supervisors), 2003 was the first year in recent history when government employees retired at rates higher than those projected.<sup>9</sup> Although the percentage of retiring employees remains low (less than five percent), those who retire are among the employees with the

strongest institutional knowledge and talent. Furthermore, since many agencies were downsizing during much of the 1990s and now must play catch-up while dealing with expanding workloads, even a modest retirement rate can have a distressing impact. Adding to this pressure is the fact that significant numbers of federal employees voluntarily leave government before retirement, often to work in the private or nonprofit sector. In FY2003, in addition to 50,000 retirements, more than 47,000 federal employees resigned, died or were terminated.

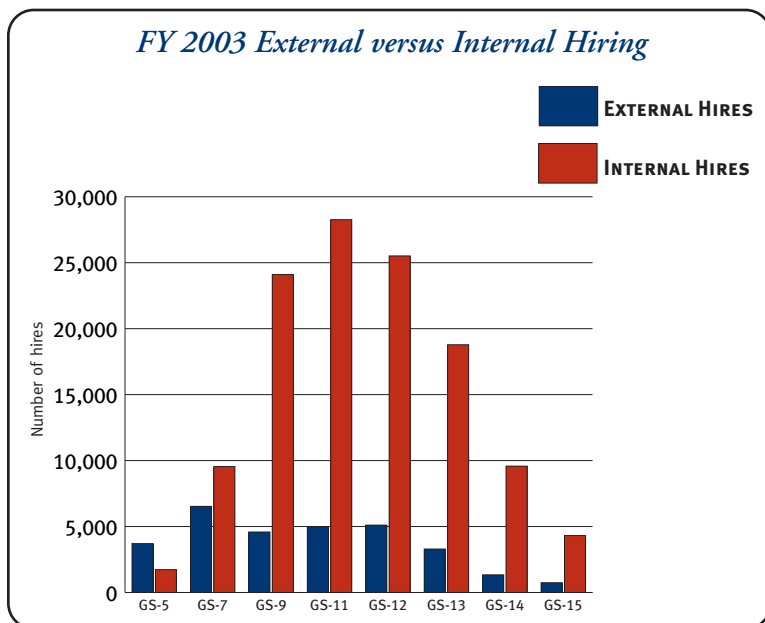
These ongoing circumstances will require both large-scale promotion from within and external hiring to fill the gaps. Which of these approaches is best will depend upon the specific responsibilities and requirements of the job in question. Nevertheless, given the scale of the government's pending talent needs, there will be many positions in which external applicants will be highly desirable.

## THE STATE OF MID-CAREER HIRING

To better understand how the federal government has responded to these workforce challenges through external hiring, the Partnership looked at two key data points: the number of mid-career vacancy announcements (those at the GS-12 to 15 levels) open to external candidates<sup>10</sup> and the number of external mid-careers hired by the government.

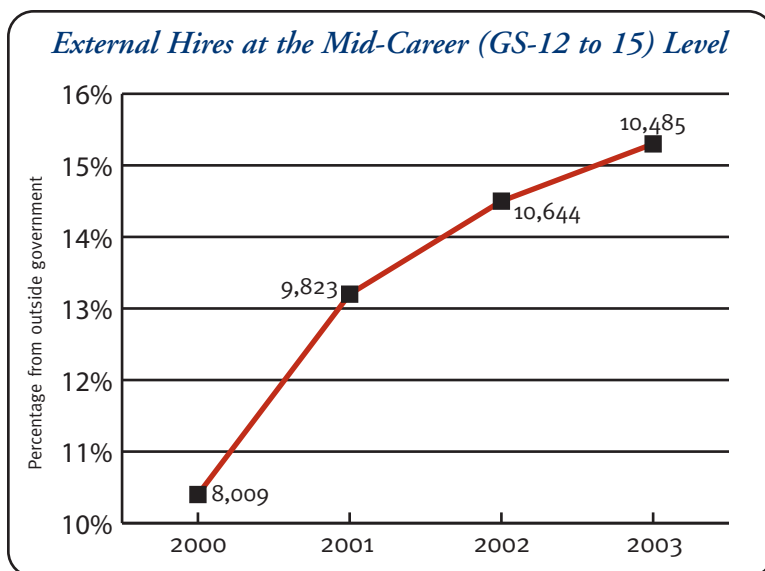
### *Hiring External Mid-Career Candidates Is on the Rise*

As reported in the Partnership's 2002 report on mid-career hiring, the federal government continues to draw the vast majority of its mid-career hires from within its workforce via competitive



promotion. The graph at left demonstrates that the proportion of competitive service<sup>11</sup> new hires from outside government is much lower for mid-career positions than for entry level jobs.<sup>12</sup>

While still relatively low, the number of individuals hired into GS-12 to 15 jobs from outside government has increased. Of the more than 68,000 employees hired at the GS-12 to 15 level in FY2003, more than 15 percent were from outside government, as opposed to just 10 percent at the time of the original report.<sup>13</sup>



The graph at left shows the steady increase in the percentage of GS-12 to 15 jobs filled by candidates from outside the federal government, as opposed to job movement within government through promotion, transfer and conversion from non-permanent authorities (such as PMIs or career interns).

This four-year trend demonstrates that agency officials are increasingly turning to professionals from outside the government to fill upper-level positions where appropriate.

This is not surprising in light of recent economic conditions that reduced private sector competition as well as targeted recruitment efforts initiated by federal agencies in response to internal needs. Although the shift is not drastic, the net increase over a four year period, in both

*External Hires at Mid-Career (GS-12 to 15) Level*

Year	Number of External Hires	Number of Internal Hires	Total Hires	Percentage External
FY 2000	8,009	68,438	76,447	10.48%
FY 2003	10,485	58,191	68,676	15.27%



the percentage and raw number of external mid-career hires, suggests that the emerging “best mix” includes more professionals who join the government after spending part of their careers in the private sector or elsewhere.

*Fewer Mid-Career Jobs Are Open to Outside Candidates*

Although the number of experienced, non-federal workers who are being successfully recruited into government service has steadily increased since the Partnership issued its first report, the number of mid-career jobs open to the general public has steadily decreased.

When a federal agency decides to open a position to external candidates, the agency is required to list that job on the USAJobs website maintained by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM). While this satisfies the minimum public notice requirement established by OPM, federal agencies may also advertise those positions more widely through the use of targeted recruitment bulletins or announcements (e.g., to colleges and universities) or through the use of paid advertisements in the print or electronic media.

When the Partnership issued its first report, the federal government was opening more than half (51 percent) of its vacancy announcements to external applicants. In FY2003, more than 36,000 vacancy announcements were posted at USAJobs for jobs at the mid-career level.<sup>14</sup> Of those, only 43 percent were open to applicants from out-

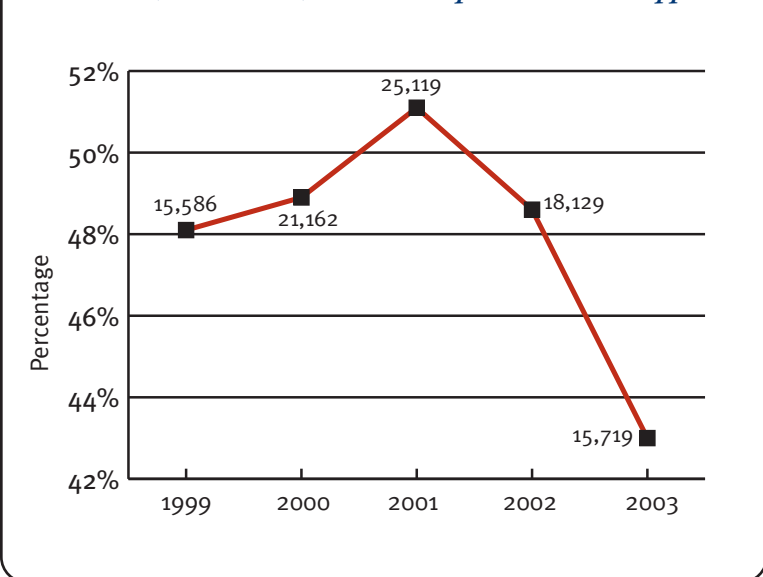
side the federal government.<sup>15</sup> This represents a decrease since the time of the Partnership’s original report in both the raw number and the percentage of vacancy announcements that would allow managers to consider both external and internal talent in filling positions.

The drop in the percentage of mid-career vacancies open to external applicants represents a reversal in the trend observed in the two years leading up to the Partnership’s original report. As shown below, there has been a steady decline in mid-career vacancies that are open to the public since FY2001, following a three year trend showing gradual increases in the number

*Mid-Career (GS-12 to 15) Vacancies Open to External Applicants*

Year	Number of Vacancy Announcements	Number Open to Public	Percentage Open to Public
FY 2001	49,155	25,119	51.1%
FY 2003	36,596	15,719	43.0%

*Mid-Career (GS-12 to 15) Vacancies Open to External Applicants*



of mid-career positions open externally.<sup>16</sup>

One might expect to see the number of external mid-career hires decrease along with the decline in the number of vacancy announcements open externally. However, our data shows that in recent years the trends are going in opposite directions.

Understanding the movement of these two trends (number of external hires and vacancy announcements open externally) requires further research. Shifts in the data could be caused by a myriad of things; the amount of movement and the reasons for that movement are likely to vary dramatically by agency. Indeed, historical perspective on federal government hiring practices demonstrates that the relationship between these two trends is hardly obvious – it takes more than opening vacancies to sources outside government to increase the number of qualified external applicants (and eventual hires) for each vacancy.

*Government Efforts to Attract External Mid-Career Candidates Are More Efficient*

While the cause of the data trend is unclear, the fact that hiring is increasing while the number of open vacancy announcements is decreasing leads us to believe that agencies are becoming more efficient at targeting external candidates.<sup>17</sup> In FY2000, every ten vacancy announcements that were open to external applicants produced just under four external mid-career hires, but by FY2003, the government hired nearly seven external mid-career professionals for every vacancy announcement open to external applicants (see chart below).<sup>18</sup>

Thus, after determining that a mid-career job should be open to applicants from outside government, federal agencies are, on average, doing a better job of attracting and hiring qualified external mid-career professionals than they were three years ago.

*Efficiency and Approaches Vary Greatly Among Different Agencies*

An agency-by-agency evaluation of mid-career hiring and vacancy announcements confirms the apparent disconnect between opening vacancies to external candidates and success in hiring external candidates. There is little overlap between those agencies that hire large numbers of people from external sources and those that open a large percentage of their vacancies to external applicants.

Among cabinet and large independent agencies, the Small Business Administration opens almost all of its mid-career vacancies to external

*Mid-Career (GS-12 to 15) Hiring Success as Ratio*

Year	Number of Vacancy Announcements Open to External Applicants	Number of External Hires	Ratio
FY 2000	21,162	8,009	0.38
FY 2001	25,119	9,823	0.39
FY 2002	18,129	10,644	0.59
FY 2003	15,719	10,485	0.67

*Agency Breakdown of Mid-Career (GS-12 to 15) Hiring and Vacancy Announcements*

Agency	External Mid-Career Hires (%)	Mid-Career Vacancies Open to Public (%)
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE	14.06%	34.42%
DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE	12.11%	46.49%
DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE	20.87%	33.22%
<i>ARMY</i>	22.24%	N/A
<i>AIR FORCE</i>	21.63%	N/A
<i>NAVY</i>	21.38%	N/A
<i>OTHER DEFENSE</i>	15.61%	N/A
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION	12.62%	60.45%
DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY	12.71%	39.91%
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES	25.36%	58.00%
DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY	10.30%	27.55%
DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT	13.94%	25.93%
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR	12.61%	35.48%
DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE	8.34%	30.04%
DEPARTMENT OF LABOR	12.30%	57.01%
DEPARTMENT OF STATE	22.83%	30.83%
DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION	13.96%	51.20%
DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY	6.45%	33.21%
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS	9.93%	47.21%
AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT	20.14%	35.65%
ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY	12.56%	49.83%
GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION	14.06%	34.27%
NATIONAL AERONAUTICS AND SPACE ADMINISTRATION	11.47%	43.41%
NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION	8.70%	32.43%
OFFICE OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT	11.29%	63.54%
SMALL BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION	4.24%	97.14%
SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION	7.72%	61.41%

applicants (97 percent) but fills all but four percent of those jobs from within. The

Department of State appears to be more strategic in opening vacancies to external applicants.

It manages to fill almost 23 percent of its mid-

career jobs from external sources despite only opening 31 percent of mid-career openings to external applicants. The table on the previous page represents cabinet and major independent agency data on this report's two central areas of exploration. Agencies that opened more than 50 percent of their mid-career vacancies to external applicants or selected more than 20 percent of their mid-career hires from external sources in FY2003 are highlighted in red.

While agency missions, recruitment budgets and human resources priorities vary greatly, lessons learned and best practices from one agency can

prove instructive to other agencies' midcareer hiring efforts.

Among senior human resources officials at major federal agencies, targeting mid-career talent from outside government is highly regarded when done strategically. Rosemary Taylor, the Deputy Assistant Secretary at the Office of Human Resources, Department of Health and Human Services, believes that her agency hires externally for more than one-quarter of its mid-career posi-

tions, "because of the nature of our workforce...[we hire] scientists, doctors, people managing major entitlement program like TANF [Temporary Assistance For Needy Families] and Head Start."

For other agencies, success in attracting external mid-career hires is a result of specific agency initiatives to transform its workforce. As part of Secretary of State Colin Powell's Diplomatic Readiness Initiative, State is working to close a significant civil service hiring gap and brought in more than 20 percent of its mid-career hires from outside government last year. According to Sharlyn Grigsby, the Director of the Department of State's Office of Civil Service Personnel Management, "It wasn't going to help [close the gap] to do just internal promotion, so Department of State's civil service has sought to open up vacancies to all sources." As shown by the data above, State has excelled in bringing in experience from outside government to a greater extent than many agencies that have opened more vacancies to the public.

According to Grigsby, the benefit of external mid-career hiring is that "seasoned, experienced individuals can really hit the ground running. They've got experience that is directly related to the job." In addition, hiring from external sources adds another perspective that can be tapped in achieving agencies' missions. Ellen Tunstall, the Director of Workforce Issues and International Programs for the Defense Department's Office of Civilian Personnel Policy, noted, "there are all kinds of diversity in the workforce, not just gender or race, but diversity in terms of background, skills and ways of looking at things. I think that where you have a good mix of those kinds of experiences you are going to be better equipped as an organization."

Some agencies have programs to attract experi-

*"I was the CEO of two not-for-profit companies and I reached a point, after 17 years, when I had accomplished all of my long range goals. I was at a turning point and looking for new challenges, and that's when I decided to pursue an opportunity in the federal government."*

— Mary Burness

Ms. Burness joined the Department of Labor after a career in the non-profit sector. She recently completed DoL's SES Candidate Development Program and is currently a Special Assistant at the National Institute of Health's National Cancer Institute.

enced talent, such as the Department of Defense’s business fellows program and the Department of Labor’s MBA recruitment program.<sup>19</sup> Others, like HHS, do not explicitly target mid-career professionals in their recruiting but often are attractive to experienced professionals from outside government because of the nature of the work done by the agency and because workers in state government and private industry have an opportunity to see first-hand the work that is done at HHS through its extensive social service programs.

Department of Labor Human Resources Director Deliza Salas sees mid-career hiring as a delicate balance at her agency, where only 12 percent of mid-career hires are made from outside government but where more than half of all mid-career position openings are advertised externally. “The truth is that while everyone wants to get the people from outside, [internal candidates] are all well known and well respected within the agency,” she said. “In theory, if you possess the competencies we are looking for, it doesn’t matter where you got them from.”

### *The “Right Way” to Hire Extends to Mid-Career Hiring*

Mid-career hiring is subject to the same roadblocks that experts inside and outside government have highlighted across the federal government’s hiring process. Regardless of job type and applicant pools, the federal government often takes longer to fill vacancies than private sector companies. A recent General Accounting Office report based on interviews with the Human Resources Directors at the government’s 24 largest agencies identified a hiring process that is too time consuming: with an estimated three month average time to hire.<sup>20</sup> Expanding a job search to include external candidates may place

more stress on the process but in many cases may be necessary to find the right match for the job(s) at issue.

Recent observations about federal vacancy announcements are even more alarming when applied to external mid-career candidates, who have little or no previous exposure to the federal sector and its vernacular.

A review of federal vacancy announcements by the Merit Systems Protection Board found that more than half of all vacancy announcements sampled were poorly written, used difficult-to-understand or threatening language, and made little or no attempt to sell the federal government, the agency or the position to be filled.<sup>21</sup>

The qualifications criteria contained in vacancy announcements may also present a more substantive barrier to external candidates. Qualifications that unduly stress experience that can only be amassed in government discourage quality external applicants from applying and also exacerbate negative perceptions of an inward-looking federal bureaucracy. In determining the desired skills, experiences and source for filling a mid-career vacancy, agencies must consider the commitment of career civil servants while not overlooking the vast potential of external talent.

*“[Public service] was always something I wanted to do...I was always interested in being a federal prosecutor. [Today] I prosecute people who are involved in violating the endangered species law...people who are smuggling or trading endangered species. It’s a great job...and it’s a job that is unique to federal government.”*

— Wayne D. Hettenbach

Mr. Hettenbach left private practice to be a Trial Attorney in the Department of Justice’s Environmental and Natural Resources Division.

### *It's Not Going to Be Easy*

A recent survey by the Partnership for Public Service found that the older people get, the more difficult it is to recruit them into government service. When you ask college students and recent graduates if they are “interested in working for the federal government,” 65 percent respond yes. For mid-career professionals, only 49 percent respond favorably. And when you ask if “there are great jobs for **people like me** in the federal government,” 69 percent of college students agree, but that number drops to 49 percent for mid-career professionals.

The survey also finds that 63 percent of mid-career professionals believe that “when it comes to helping other people” a not-for-profit group is where they can “do the **most** good.” This common belief on the part of mid-career talent

undermines one of the federal government’s primary selling points, which is the opportunity to make a difference in other people’s lives.

Finally, if the federal government wants to significantly enhance its ability to attract mid-career candidates, it will need to address the perception that the federal government is a place that stifles innovation. Seventy-eight percent of mid-career professionals believe that “the federal government workplace is in **desperate need of reform** to make it a better place for people to work.”

These numbers prove that experienced mid-career workers are going to be even more difficult to recruit than younger candidates, which means the federal government will need to go the extra mile if it seriously wants to draw from this talent pool.

---

## MOVING FORWARD: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE

**R**ecruiting mid-career talent from outside of government will be a crucial factor in government’s ability to meet the challenges that lie ahead.

Attracting, hiring and retaining quality mid-career employees requires a holistic approach, from workforce planning to identify areas where experienced talent is needed, to recruiting qualified applicants, assessing their skills, making the sale, and integrating mid-career professionals into the existing workforce. To help federal agencies – and the federal government overall – tap the potential of external mid-career talent, the Partnership for Public Service offers the following recommendations as a roadmap to successful midcareer hiring:

Federal agencies should:

1. ***Transform federal workplaces into environments that reward performance and encourage innovation.*** There is no greater obstacle to recruiting our most talented citizens than the widely-held perception that the federal government is a place that stifles creativity and entrepreneurial thinking. Significant reforms are needed to make government a more dynamic and performance-based environment. The federal government has a new opportunity on this front with the establishment of merit-based pay systems at the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security. If these reforms prove successful, they may be emulated by other agencies, making their implementation vital to the cause of making the federal workplace more attractive to external candidates.

- 2. Market the government specifically to mid-career talent.** It's one thing to make reforms, but it's just as important to get this message of reform out to the public. Agencies need to develop recruiting materials tailored to mid-career professionals. These materials should stress the reform message, but they should also highlight other selling points that resonate with mid-career audiences. In the Partnership's recent poll of mid-career professionals, this group identified "good benefits and insurance," "helping people and making a difference," and "serving my country/community" as the three most salient reasons to consider federal employment. The federal government should also create incentives that can be marketed to mid-career candidates, such as Ohio Senator George Voinovich's proposal to provide more vacation time for members of the Senior Executive Service and personnel who join the government mid-way through their careers.
- 3. Identify skill gaps that can be filled by external candidates.** When agency leaders conduct comprehensive workforce planning, they should evaluate the depth and breadth of their employee pool to assure that it has the human capital resources to meet not only current challenges but also any projected skills gaps that will emerge with impending retirements. For mid-career positions in which the number of qualified internal candidates is limited, agencies would benefit from casting a wider net in looking for replacements.
- 4. Be strategic about what jobs will be opened to the public.** The fact that the Small Business Administration opens the most mid-career jobs to the public but hires the fewest external candidates should teach the government a lesson. Agencies should avoid policies that simply require that all vacancies be open to the public. These policies do not yield results and unnecessarily increase the workload on human resources staffs. An unintended consequence is that if external candidates apply for these jobs and are given short shrift, negative perceptions about the federal hiring process are reinforced. At the same time, agencies should think about opening jobs that have traditionally been closed to the public, if there is not a compelling reason to limit these jobs to internal candidates.

*"I was in the U.S. Marines for 30 years. The last 15 years I'd done higher staff level assignments, working the 'government end' of the Marine Corps...the skill sets I had from staff time lent themselves to working for government...it just seemed like a good idea."*

— Paul Briggs

Mr. Briggs joined the Department of Labor after a 30 year military career with the United States Marine Corps that culminated with a position on the staff of the Secretary of Defense. He recently completed DoL's SES Candidate Development Program and is currently a Special Assistant at Employment and Training Administration's Office of National Programs.

5. **Write vacancy announcements that do not alienate applicants.** For years the federal government has been criticized for utilizing vacancy announcements and job descriptions that are arcane and off-putting. The Partnership strongly advises that, if they haven't already done so, federal agencies should make a major commitment to rethink

*“Working for an international organization offers a lot of perspective ...in my current job I've been able to bring with me a unique understanding of UN culture and bureaucracy. I've done a lot of things that gave me experience with different organizations and I've really benefited from that.”*

— Dennis J. King

Mr. King joined the Department of State as a Foreign Affairs Analyst in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research after working for USAID, the United Nations, and National Public Radio. He works on humanitarian issues for the Bureau's Humanitarian Information Unit.

vacancy announcements and job descriptions to assure that they are written in a way that is easily digestible and appealing to people from outside government, particularly those mid-career professionals who are used to private sector recruitment and marketing techniques. For starters, they should stop calling them “vacancy announcements” and use more colloquial language like “job openings.” In addition, federal agencies should evaluate the qualifications standards in vacancy announcements to make sure they do not unnecessarily skew selection toward internal applicants.

6. **Use available hiring flexibilities to both attract applicants and reduce the length of the hiring process.** During the past few years, there has been a great deal of legislative and regulatory action to increase hiring flexibilities. But these new flexibilities will only show results if they are employed throughout the government. Unfortunately, there is significant evidence that they are not being used. A 2004 OPM survey of agencies showed that only one agency has filled more than 15 positions using category rating, and 20 of the 23 agencies surveyed have filled five or less positions using category rating (the new alternative to the “rule of three”). OPM should continue to help agencies educate their human resources professionals and management about existing hiring flexibilities, and agency leaders should encourage the use of these flexibilities and allocate adequate funding. Programs that are already in place like recruitment bonuses, relocation bonuses, and direct hire authority for specialized and high-need occupations could be major tools in helping agencies attract and retain the experienced talent that is necessary to meet agency objectives.

7. **Expand mentoring and orientation programs to help integrate and welcome external mid-career hires.** While external mid-career hires can bring a wealth of skills and abilities as well as a fresh perspective to federal agencies, it is important that hires from outside of government (as well as new employees transferring from other agencies) are given assistance in learning the culture and work process of their new agencies. The Partnership recommends that agencies implement orientation programs that recognize the unique culture of the federal workforce and help external mid-career hires assimilate. On the individual level, agencies could implement mentoring and professional development programs to promote both short term assimilation and long term retention of external hires.



8. ***Create networks to generate an active pipeline of experienced talent interested in government work.*** After nearly a decade of not hiring on college campuses, many federal agencies have begun to focus on renewing their relationships with colleges and universities to get the word out about entry-level opportunities. But for recruiters, the networks and relationships they need to forge to recruit mid-career professionals are more difficult to tap. Thus, the Partnership urges agency human resource professionals and managers to identify and tap into the appropriate networking channels to target desired mid-career employees. Appropriate networks include graduate and professional schools, alumni associations, professional and trade organizations and commercial career building organizations (both web-based and otherwise).
9. ***Develop and enhance hiring programs that work for mid-career professionals.*** After identifying occupations or vacancies that would benefit from external recruitment, agency leaders need to determine whether talent from the outside is best attracted through the regular competitive hiring process or specialized programs. The Partnership continues to advocate that the federal government develop and use special programs to attract high quality talent at the mid-career level.

For example, a major recommendation of the Partnership's 2002 mid-career hiring report was the creation of a Presidential Management Fellows program for mid-career talent. This was accomplished in November 2003 when President Bush signed Executive Order 13318, renaming and restructuring the Presidential Management Intern Program to include a senior fellows component that will allow mid-level professionals both from within and outside government to take advantage of a series of training and development opportunities over a two-year period. The Senior Fellows program will be launched in the near future with a class of several dozen fellows. The Partnership strongly supports OPM's work to expand the old PMI program and hopes that the new cadres of PMF senior fellows will eventually expand to match the number of junior fellows to create a viable recruiting program for mid-career talent that mimics the high impact the PMI program has had over the past 25 years.

10. ***Make sure that efforts to look for external talent compliment the existing workforce.*** External mid-career hiring should be conducted in a way that is sensitive to the legitimate expectations of current employees. If efforts to bring in mid-career professionals from external sources are viewed by the existing workforce as threatening to their career prospects, employee satisfaction levels can decline with serious implications for organizational success. External hiring initiatives should always be accompanied by careful attention to the developmental needs of the existing workforce through the design of career paths and other means. Agency leaders should be careful to communicate to employees that there remain significant opportunities for progress in their careers.

### *Endnotes*

- 1 National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, “The 9/11 Commission Report,” 399.
- 2 *ibid.*, 77.
- 3 *ibid.*, 344
- 4 The federal General Schedule pay grade system includes 15 grades, with 10 intermediate steps in each grade. GS-12 to 15 salaries range from \$52,899 to \$113,674, and are adjusted according to local economies. Only the approximately 7,000 members of the federal Senior Executive Service have a higher salary range.
- 5 U.S. Office of Personnel Management, “Annual Report to Congress: Federal Equal Opportunity Recruitment Program,” 2003. Hispanics make up 13 percent of the civilian labor force. Highest levels of system defined as GS-13 to 15.
- 6 The merit principles are the set of guidelines set in place to prevent patronage appointments and to ensure that federal appointments are made according to the knowledge, skills and abilities of an applicant, 5 U.S.C. Section 2301.
- 7 Based on end of FY2003 cohort analysis projected to end of FY2008, U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2004.
- 8 The figures represented in the graph do not include early retirements.
- 9 “Supervisors” are defined as any employee that performs at least one other employee’s annual performance appraisal. Data is for full-time permanent non-seasonal employees. U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2004.
- 10 USAJobs is the official job website of the federal government. All available jobs must be posted on this site for viewing by either all applicants or current federal employees only.
- 11 Positions in the Executive Branch are placed in the competitive service and filled through an open competitive selection process unless excepted by statute, Executive Order, or OPM action.
- 12 Central Personnel Data File, U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2003.
- 13 U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2003. The data for FY2000 reported here differs from that in our original report. The figures have been recalculated for technical accuracy, by excluding mass-transfers of employees from one organization to another due to a reorganization, and including some promotion authorities that were previously excluded.
- 14 Each vacancy announcement can cover one or more vacant positions.
- 15 Monster House Data Source, Office of Personnel Management and USAJobs, FY2003. The FY2001 data has been updated to reflect new collection techniques used as a result of the USAJobs redesign.
- 16 Monster House Data Source, Office of Personnel Management and USAJobs, FY1999-2003.
- 17 There is not a one-to-one correlation between a posted vacancy announcement and a hire made because vacancy announcements can be for multiple open positions, and agencies are not required to hire any of the applicants that result from a vacancy announcement.
- 18 U.S. Office of Personnel Management, USAJobs and Central Personnel Data File.
- 19 The Department of Labor MBA program hires recent Business School graduates who often have significant work experience at GS-9.
- 20 General Accounting Office, “Human Capital: Opportunities to Improve Executive Agencies’ Hiring Processes,” 2003.
- 21 U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, “Help Wanted: A Review of Federal Vacancy Announcements,” 2002.





PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

1725 Eye Street NW, Suite 900  
Washington DC 20006

202 775 9112 phone  
202 775 8883 fax  
[www.outpublicservice.org](http://www.outpublicservice.org)

ISBN 0-9729365-8-0



\$10.95