

# Recruiting Qualified Career Senior Leadership: How Are We Doing?

A Survey of Current Career Federal Executives



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## Senior Executives Association

SEA is a non-profit, non-partisan professional association that has served as the voice of the career federal executive corps since 1980. SEA's mission is to improve the efficiency, effectiveness, and productivity of the federal government; to advance the professionalism and advocate the interests of career federal executives; and to enhance public recognition of their accomplishments. For additional information about SEA, visit [www.seniorexecs.org](http://www.seniorexecs.org).

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### Contents

Introduction and Background.....	1
Survey Content.....	2
Overview of Respondents.....	2
Executive Summary.....	4
Key Findings.....	7
Key Finding 1.....	8
Key Finding 2.....	11
Key Finding 3.....	14
Key Finding 4.....	16
Key Finding 5.....	18
Key Finding 6.....	19
Conclusions and Recommendations.....	22
Narrative Comments.....	24
Appendix A: Survey Instrument.....	28
Appendix B: <i>Taking the Helm</i> Attractors/Detractors.....	35
Appendix C: Summary of Factors Contributing to Difficulty in Attracting Candidates....	37
Appendix D: Summary of Attractors/Detractors.....	38

# Introduction and Background

At the *Morning of Reflections* discussion that preceded the April 2015 Senior Executives Association (SEA) Professional Development League's (PDL) annual banquet honoring Presidential Distinguished Rank Award winners for 2014, a number of awardees in attendance raised concerns about whether highly talented and qualified employees from both within and outside government are sufficiently attracted to applying for jobs in the two highest echelons of the career federal service – Senior Executive Service (SES) and Senior Professional (SP) positions. Although the attendees cited many rewards of serving in these positions, they also expressed fear that pay stagnation, reduced awards and recognition, work-life stresses and the constant pillorying of career senior executives and professionals

*“I have tried to recruit from my staff for my SL (Senior Level) position as I may leave soon. None of my five GS-15s is interested because the increase in stress, oversight risk, loss of work-life balance and administrative burdens are not worth the small after tax increase in pay.”*

by Congress and the media are likely taking a toll – not only on current executives – but also on high-performing, talented potential future job candidates who, in many cases, appear to be shunning the opportunity to apply for SES and SP job vacancies.

In this regard, several attendees expressed the view that reduced interest among talented potential candidates in serving in SES and SP positions could negatively impact the viability and capability of the entire career senior executive corps. Moreover, some worried that recruitment difficulties could seriously jeopardize successful operational execution and mission accomplishment across the federal government. It was also noted that these and other potential recruitment problems could be especially grave given the large number of expected retirements in the career SES and SP ranks over the next few years.

The concerns expressed by the Rank Award winners echoed those expressed anecdotally and in focus groups involving SEA members in recent years. Further, they are consistent with data and written comments derived via prior SEA surveys conducted in 2006 and 2009. These concerns have also been expressed by a number of SEA members at the SES and SP level who have contacted the Association seeking information over the last several years to ask about the process for seeking voluntary downgrades to GS-15 and equivalent positions due to their perception that the risks and frustrations of continuing to serve at the executive level far outweigh the potential rewards in today's federal executive workforce environment.

With these very compelling issues in mind, SEA decided to conduct a survey centered on the current recruitment climate involving the filling of career SES and SP positions. During

*“You get what you pay for. The problem with government is there is no consequence for losing good people.”*

the month of August 2015, SEA invited its SES and SP level members who currently work in the federal government as well as current non-SEA members serving in SES and SP positions to participate in a broad-ranging survey.

Particular emphasis in the survey was placed on obtaining the views of those participants with recent, hands-on experience in attempting to fill job vacancies for career Senior Executive and Senior Professional positions involving activities such as recruitment, qualifications assessment, and selection. As a result, SEA gathered detailed data and insights from individuals who have served as hiring managers, selecting officials and appointing officials, members of interview and selection panels and agency-based Executive Resources Boards (ERB), and human resources advisors, and those who have served on U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) Qualifications Review Boards (QRB).

### **Survey Content**

The survey posed numerous questions related to perceived level of interest by potential job candidates (both internal and external) for career SES and SP positions, including possible attractors as well as detractors. A large number of questions also dealt with the perceived quality of individuals who are actually applying for SES and SP jobs, as well as the reasons why some talented individuals are not applying. Some questions delved into what, if anything, federal agencies are doing to stimulate interest in and preparing current employees for Senior Executive and Senior Professional positions.

Survey participants were also asked, given the conditions facing career SES and SP employees, if they are actively encouraging talented, high-performing employees in their agencies to apply for higher level positions and, if so, how their encouragement is received. Additionally, survey participants were asked what they find most rewarding and discouraging about currently serving in the career executive corps (See Appendix A for the full survey instrument).

In addition to answering numerous pre-formatted, forced choice questions, survey respondents were also given the opportunity to express, in their own words, their views on the problems, challenges and opportunities inherent in the current recruitment climate. Almost all respondents took advantage of the opportunity and supplied numerous, insightful (and in some cases very detailed) narrative comments, concerns and suggestions regarding where problems lie and what can be done to address them. Some cited practices in their organizations/agencies that may hold the potential for broader application.

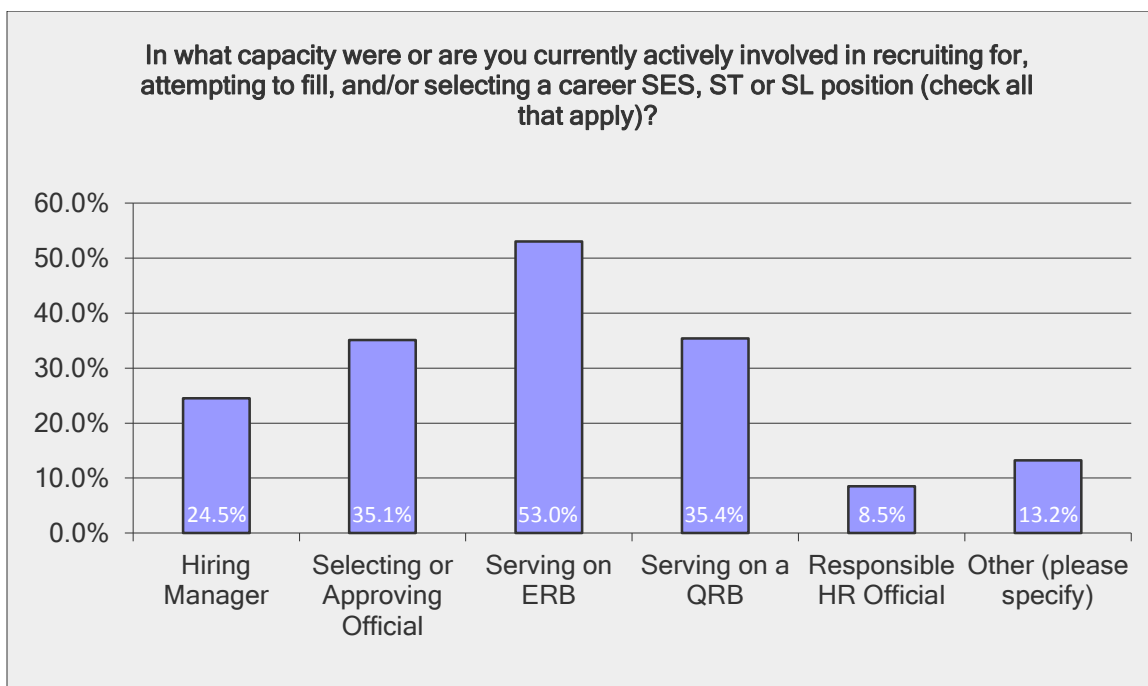
### **Overview of Respondents**

Almost five hundred current SES and SP employees from across the government completed the survey. The number of respondents is about equally divided between SEA members and non-members. Approximately two-thirds of respondents are male and one-third female. Of those responding, approximately 86% occupy SES positions and 14% occupy Scientific or Professional (ST), Senior Level (SL), or other senior professional type positions. Among federal agencies with the greatest number of respondents were (in order) the Departments of Defense, Health and Human Services, Homeland

Security, Justice, and Energy; NASA, and the Departments of Transportation, Interior, Commerce, and Veterans Affairs.

Eight and one-half percent of respondents have served in their current positions for less than two years; 31% have served between two and five years; 34% have served between six and ten years; and just over 26% have served for over ten years. Among respondents, almost 15% indicated plans to retire within a year of the time they took the survey; 24% indicated plans to retire within the next two to three years; 21% indicated plans to retire within the next four to five years; and 40% indicated they have no plans to retire in the foreseeable future.

Approximately 71% of respondents indicated they had been actively involved in recruiting, attempting to fill, or in selecting a candidate for an SES, SL or ST position within the past two years. Many of these respondents engaged in key roles in their agencies as hiring managers, selecting officials, serving on interview panels and selection boards and as ERB or QRB members.



# Executive Summary

In recent years, SEA members and many non-members in senior management and professional jobs across the federal sector have warned of the growing reluctance of high performing GS-15s and 14s and other talented potential internal and external candidates to pursue opportunities to prepare themselves and/or apply for career SES and SP positions. Although much of information received by SEA on this issue has been anecdotal in nature, the tenor of urgency has increased and become more commonly recognized within federal agencies as a clear and troubling vulnerability.

Moreover, surveys conducted by SEA in 2006 and 2009 provided early warning signs that both then current career senior executives as well as GS-15 and 14s (and equivalents) were considerably concerned about the attractiveness of SES and SP positions – both from recruitment and retention standpoints. Following the 2006 survey of its members, developed and conducted in partnership with Avue Technologies Corporation, SEA published a report of its results entitled, “Lost in Translation.” The report revealed, among other things, that almost half of responding executives felt the government’s SES pay and performance management systems had either a *negative* or *very negative* effect on the interest of their GS-15 and 14 employees in becoming members of the SES. In 2008 a U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) survey of SES members reported that less than half of executives believed SES pay and benefits were helpful in attracting and retaining high quality senior executives.

To better understand these issues, SEA determined that more specific data and insights were needed from GS 15s and 14s themselves. In 2009 it developed and conducted an online, government-wide survey, again in partnership with Avue, to collect the views of employees in GS-15 and 14 positions (and their equivalents) related to applying for and serving in career senior level executive and professional positions in the federal government. The survey also sought information on their level of professional development, job satisfaction, future employment plans and experience in applying for higher level jobs. SEA received over 11,700 responses to the survey and approximately 3,700 narrative comments.

SEA and Avue Technologies issued a 2010 report based on the survey results entitled, *Taking the Helm: Attracting the Next Generation of Federal Leaders*. Among the key findings and recommendations flowing from that report, as related to the focus of this most recent SEA recruitment climate study, included:

## *Findings:*

- *The most significant attractors for considering an SES or SP position for GS -15 and 14 (or equivalents) employees were the ability to contribute more the mission of the agency; greater opportunity for creativity and innovation; the honor of serving at the highest levels; and increased responsibility and authority.*

- *The most significant detractors for considering an SES or SP position for GS-15 and 14 (or equivalent) employees were the possibility of being transferred or reassigned geographically; the potential negative impact on work and family responsibilities; increased job risk/loss of GS job rights and lack of an assured annual pay adjustment. (See Appendix B for a summary of most significant attractors and detractors from the Taking the Helm Report).*
- *Although compensation or financial incentives were not top attractors or detractors, numerous narrative comments expressed concerns that the difference in pay between GS-15 and SES/SP positions is often not commensurate with the increased workload, responsibility and risk.*
- *Despite a majority of survey respondents stating an interest in serving in SES and SP positions, less than 50% said that the attractors to serving in these jobs outweighed the detractors.*

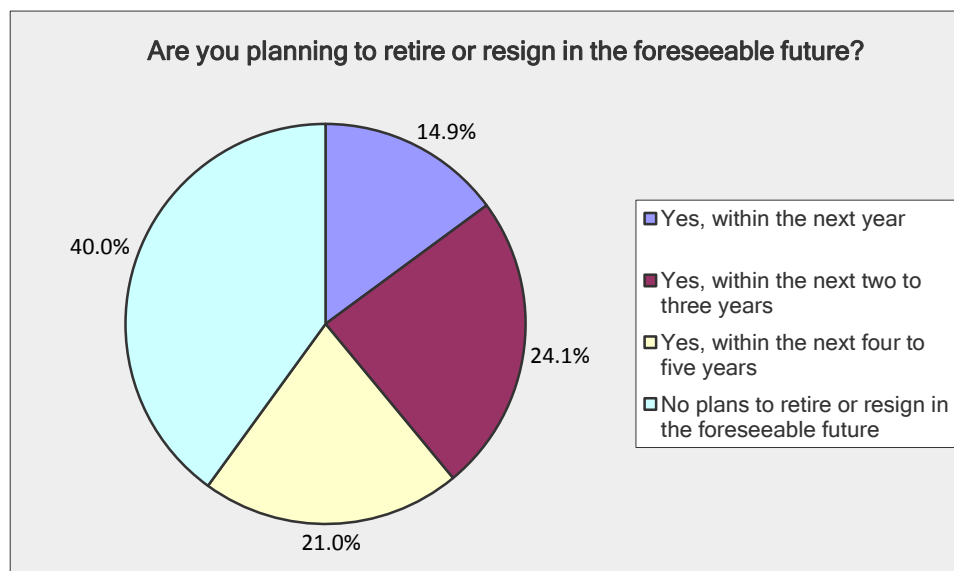
#### *Recommendations:*

- *Congress, OPM, and agencies should make career SES and Senior Professional positions more attractive to potential candidates by increasing the incentives for serving in these positions, including assured annual pay increases for those performing at the fully successful level or better and an assured increase of at least 5 percent in salary for new career executives and senior-level officials.*
- *OPM and agencies should develop additional mechanisms for interested and qualified GS-14/15 employees to obtain valuable developmental experiences, including within their current geographic areas.*
- *OPM and agencies should emphasize the positive aspects of serving in SES and Senior Professional positions as expressed by survey respondents in order to attract and recruit highly qualified candidates to senior career positions.*
- *OPM and agencies should simplify the job application process for SES and SP positions while maintaining important safeguards against politicization and acceptance of unqualified candidates.*

Even though the *Taking the Helm* report focused directly on the views of GS-15 and 14s on the attractiveness of applying for and serving in SES and SP jobs as opposed to the focus of this report (which focuses on the views of SES and SP personnel regarding their views on whether talented GS-15 and 14 employees are attracted to applying and serving senior management and professional jobs), SEA believed there could be many useful parallels in the insights obtained by the two studies. Therefore, SEA incorporated many of the same types of survey questions from *Taking the Helm* into the recruitment climate survey underlying this report.



To address the numerous complex challenges that the nation faces, the government must have a highly-qualified cadre of current and prospective future leaders for the approximately 8,000 career senior executive and professional positions that lead and advise on critical federal programs. Due to demographics and concerns about pay, workload and other issues, many talented SES and SP employees have retired or resigned in recent years while a majority of executives and professionals currently serving in these positions will be eligible for retirement over the next 5 years. Indeed, 60% of this survey's respondents indicated, as summarized below, that they plan to retire or resign within the next five years.



Unresolved challenges in attracting the best and the brightest to these positions will leave a serious leadership vacuum at the top of the civil service – one that could have dire consequences for the successful development and implementation of mission critical federal programs and policies as well as the ongoing viability of the senior executive and professional corps.

This is why SEA, with a recent prompt from a concerned group of Presidential Rank awardees, has revisited the crucial issues surrounding the attractiveness of serving in positions at the highest career levels.

*“It is discouraging to many to be part of a group that is publicly vilified and mocked for doing incredible work. I am deeply concerned about attracting and keeping highly qualified employees at all levels.”*

# Key Findings

The six key findings of this recruitment climate survey of current SES and SP employees are summarized below and illuminated in greater detail in later sections of this report.

- **Finding 1:** It is getting more difficult and time consuming for agencies to fill vacancies with high quality candidates, while the overall quality of both internal and external applicants for SES and SP positions has decreased in recent years.
- **Finding 2:** Current career senior managers and professionals are quite concerned about their agencies' ability to fill SES and SP jobs with high quality candidates and believe a variety of factors including insufficient compensation, workforce politicization and Congressional threats, work and family balance concerns, complexity of the application process and other issues are contributing to recruitment difficulties.
- **Finding 3:** Senior managers and professionals often encourage highly talented employees to apply for SES and SP positions; however, their encouragement is frequently met with mixed interest by potential candidates.
- **Finding 4:** Most agencies are taking steps to prepare, encourage, and/or gauge the level of interest of high potential employees in SES and SP positions; however, agencies' pipelines are not necessarily replete with high quality candidates.
- **Finding 5:** To be successful, today's senior executives and professionals need different types of skills, abilities and experiences than in the past.
- **Finding 6:** Currently, attractors to serving in career SES and SP positions only somewhat outweigh detractors – and this situation presents both challenges and opportunities for the government's executive resources management system.

# Key Finding 1

1. It is getting more difficult and time consuming for agencies to fill vacancies with high quality candidates, while the overall quality of both internal and external applicants for SES and SP positions has decreased in recent years.

Survey respondents were somewhat positive when asked generally about the quality of both internal and external applicants for SES and SP positions that they were familiar with as follows:

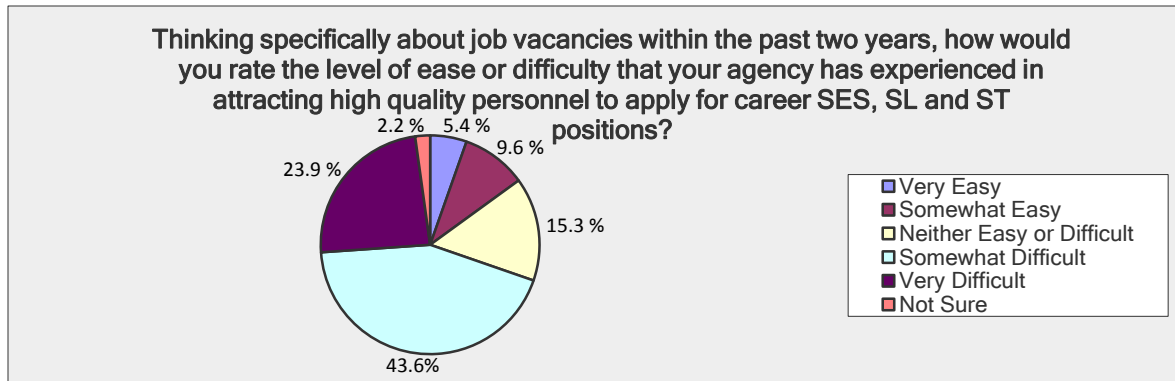
- Approximately half of survey respondents expressed the view that, over the past two years, internal applicants for SES and SP positions were of very high (10.7%) or high (40.6%) quality. Just over 39% indicated that internal applicants were of moderate quality. Almost 7% indicated internal applicants were of low quality and just over 1% felt them to be of very low quality (with just over 1% indicating they were not sure of the quality level).
- Regarding external applicants, respondents indicated about 6% were of very high quality and almost 25% of high quality. Approximately 46% indicated external applicants were of moderate quality while almost 15% felt they were of low quality and about 3.5% felt them to be of very low quality (with 4.5% indicating they were not sure of the quality level).

However, when asked to what extent, if at all, has the overall quality of internal and external candidates for career SES and SP positions changed in the past two years, respondents expressed the view that the overall quality of applicants is more often declining than increasing:

- For internal applicants, over a quarter of respondents indicated that the quality of internal applicants was either slightly lower (20.4 %) or much lower (6.6%) over the past two years versus less than 10% indicating quality was much higher (1.3%) or slightly higher (7.8%). Just over half of respondents indicated quality in recent years was about the same (52.7%) and 11.3% indicated they were not sure about quality changes.
- For external applicants, approximately a third of respondents indicated that quality was either slightly lower (23.4%) or much lower (10.2%) over the past two years, 45.1% indicated recent external applicants were about the same quality, 5.6% were of higher quality, and less than 1% of much higher quality. Just over 15% indicated they were not sure about quality changes.  
*“There is a considerable gap between current seasoned SES and relatively untested GS-15s. Most are simply not ready, and admit as much.”*
- Interestingly enough, respondents with longer tenure in their positions (six years or more) felt somewhat more negative about the declining quality of both recent internal and external applicants than did those SES and SP employees who had been in their jobs for 5 years or less. Also, respondents who plan to retire or resign within the foreseeable future (next 5 years) were more negative about the declining quality of recent internal and

external applications than respondents who stated they have no foreseeable plans to retire or resign.

In a question that asked, “Thinking specifically about job vacancies within the past two years, how would you rate the level of ease or difficulty that your agency has experienced in attracting high quality personnel to apply for SES, SL or ST positions, approximately two thirds of survey participants replied that it has been either somewhat difficult (43.6%) or very difficult (23.9%).



In another area, survey participants were asked the amount of time it takes their agencies to fill SES and SP positions. Responses reflected views that, generally speaking, the process for filling vacancies is quite slow – so much so, that it directly contributes to problems in attracting high quality candidates. For example, when asked to rate the amount of time it takes to fill career SES and SP positions, 80% of respondents indicated the time frame was “too slow,” while only 16%

*“The overly complex application process makes it difficult for both internal and external candidates.”*

indicated it was “about right” (4% indicated they were not sure).

In responding to a related question regarding to what extent the slowness has contributed to problems in attracting sufficient numbers of qualified candidates, 58% of respondents opined that it does contribute to either a great extent (20.4%) or a moderate extent (37.6%). Only 9.6% indicated it contributes either very little (6.8%) or not at all (2.8%). Just over 23% opined slowness in the process only contributes somewhat; while about 9% indicated they were not sure if it contributes to problems in recruiting or not.

*“The qualification and selection process is so long and onerous that it discourages people from even attempting to seek the position.”*

Participants were also asked if, within the last two years, their agencies had SES and/or SP

vacancies that remained unfilled due to the lack of highly qualified candidates. Just over 43% indicated they did, 28.5% indicated they did not, and 28.2% said they were not sure. Those who answered “yes” to this question were then asked how long the vacancies remained unfilled due to a lack of highly qualified candidates. Just over 58% indicated vacancies were unfilled for longer than

one year; 39% indicated the hiatus lasted between six months to one year; and less than one percent the stated the unfilled period was less than a year (1.5% indicated they were not sure).

*“The process to apply and get selected for an SES as an outside candidate takes too long. It took me about 9 months to work through the process. Most candidates do not have the time or patience to do this.”*

## Key Finding 2

2. **Current career senior managers and professionals are quite concerned about their agencies' ability to fill SES and SP jobs with high quality candidates and believe insufficient overall compensation, lack of financial incentives, punitive Congressional actions, politicized climates within agencies, concerns about work-family balance, complexity of the application process and other key factors are contributing to recruitment difficulties.**

Survey participants were asked to what extent, if any, they are concerned about the ability of their agencies to fill career SES and SP jobs with highly qualified candidates. Just over three quarters indicated they are concerned to a *great extent* (35.6%) or a *moderate extent* (39.2%). Almost 17% indicated they are at least somewhat concerned. Only 7.5% indicated they have *very little* or *no concern*.

Survey participants were also queried about potentially significant factors that might be contributing to their agencies' difficulty in attracting talented, highly qualified candidates for SES and SP positions. Participants were presented with a wide variety of factors and a range of characterizations from a menu of options. They were also invited to write in other contributing factors not on the list.

Of the thirteen listed factors in the survey, eight were most clearly rated as contributing significantly to difficulty in attracting high quality applicants by survey participants. The factors, in rank order, are as follows (see Appendix C for a detailed summary):

- *Insufficient Compensation and/or Lack of Financial Incentives in SES and SP jobs* was determined to contribute to attracting highly qualified candidates to a *great extent* by about 57% of respondents and to a *moderate extent* by about 26% (less than 6% indicated this factor contributed only to a very limited extent or not at all, while just over 9% indicated it contributed somewhat to attracting high quality candidates).
- *Promotion to SES/SP pay not accompanied by a meaningful salary increase* was determined to contribute to a *great extent* by about 52% and to a *moderate extent* by about 26% (less than 8% indicated this factor contributed only to a very limited extent or not at all, while almost 15% indicated it contributed somewhat to attracting high quality candidates).

*“There are not many benefits of being an SES over a GS-15 and the responsibilities are much greater. Raises and awards have stagnated and the jobs are higher risk so it is safer for most to stay in a 15 level position.”*

- *Punitive Congressional Bills and unfavorable comments directed at SES and SP employees* was determined to contribute to a *great extent* by 40% and to a *moderate extent* by about 26% (about 15% indicated this factor contributed only to a very limited extent or not at all, while about 17% indicated it contributed somewhat to attracting high quality candidates).
- *Political Climate Within the Agency* was determined to contribute to a *great extent* by about 31% and to a *moderate extent* by about 23% (about 25% indicated this factor contributed only to a very limited extent or not at all, while almost 17% indicated it contributed somewhat to attracting high quality candidates).  
*“I have not been able to convince good quality candidates to apply in over a year. The climate is horrible and Congress makes it worse.”*
- *Difficulty of the SES Jobs themselves (e.g., increased demands, stress, complexity)* was determined to contribute to a *great extent* by almost 28% and to a *moderate extent* by about 32% (almost 22% indicated this factor contributed only to a very limited extent or not at all, while about 18% indicated it contributed somewhat to attracting high quality candidates).  
*“The current political environment is focused on placing blame for issues and ignoring accomplishments.”*
- *Concerns about work vs. family life balance* was determined to contribute to a *great extent* by about 24% and to a *moderate extent* by about 30% (about 17% indicated this factor contributed only to a very limited extent or not at all, while about 21% indicated it contributed somewhat to attracting high quality candidates).  
*“Many highly qualified GS-15s are hearing about all the negative impacts on their work life balance and increased demands on the SES Corps and feel it is simply not worth it.”*
- *Concerns about lack of authority/resources to get the job done* was determined to contribute to a *great extent* by about 24% and to a *moderate extent* by about 34% (about 23% indicated this factor contributed only to a very limited extent or not at all, while about 23% indicated it contributed somewhat to attracting high quality candidates).
- *Complexity of the Application Process* was determined to contribute to a *great extent* by about 21% and to a *moderate extent* by about 32% (about 19% indicated this factor contributed only to a very limited extent or not at all, while about 27% indicated it contributed somewhat to attracting high quality candidates).  
*“Agencies need to empower the SES with the authority and responsibility to make decisions. Many agencies are treating SESs like GS-13s and 14s.”*

attracting high quality candidates).

Other factors that respondents felt contributed modestly to difficulty in attracting high quality applicants included *increased overall job risk, concerns about agency leadership and/or direction, and heightened emphasis on Inspector General complaints and investigations.*

*“The inability to appeal Inspector General findings to a higher authority is wrong. When OIG gets it wrong there is no real recourse.”*

Factors that were not seen as contributing much to difficulty in attracting talented candidates included *risk of geographic relocation and increased interaction with political appointees.*

*“I have found that many highly qualified GS-15s are not interested in applying for SES, SL and ST jobs and have little or no desire to undergo the lengthy, complex and cumbersome application process.”*



## Key Finding 3

### 3. Senior managers and professionals often encourage highly talented employees to apply for SES and SP positions; however, their encouragement is frequently met with mixed interest by potential candidates.

Survey participants were asked, “Given conditions in your agency, do you encourage highly qualified GS-15s (or equivalent) employees to apply for SES, SL and ST positions?” Just over two thirds (67.8%) answered yes, 23.5% answered no and 8.6% answered “not sure.” Interestingly enough, respondents who have served in their positions for more than 10 years were slightly more inclined to be proactive and positive in encouraging highly qualified employees to apply for senior level positions than those with less than 10 years of service. Also, those with no foreseeable retirement or resignation plans within the next 5 years were somewhat more inclined to answer “no” to the question.

They were also asked to explain why they answered yes or no – and many provided detailed and inspiring narrative explanations and comments. These responses covered a broad range of reasoning both in support for encouraging talented GS-15 and equivalent employees to pursue SES and SP positions as well as reasons not to encourage pursuit.

*“I still recommend that highly qualified individuals seek SES positions because it is the only way that we can hope to improve our leadership and our performance for the public.”*

On the positive side, comments included the notions of getting an opportunity (via becoming an SES or SP) to make a significant contribution and

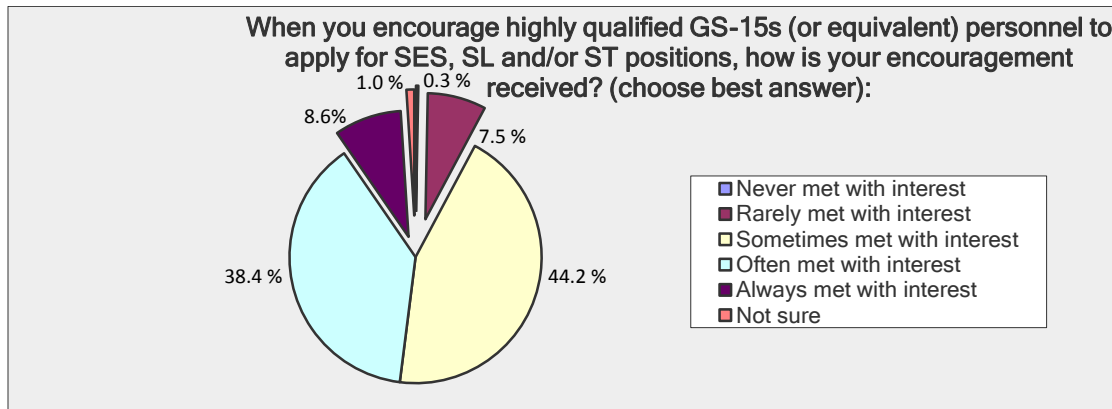
impact; ensuring that the federal government has a next generation of talented, future leaders; the honor and challenges of serving at the highest career levels in government; and the hope that compensation and recognition levels will increase commensurate with the high level of responsibility, complexity and accountability inherent in SES and SP jobs were often mentioned.

On the negative side, survey respondents often cited poor pay, lack of financial incentives, lack of appreciation and respect for career senior executive and professional contributions, politicized environments in agencies and the Congress, exhaustive and stressful work schedules, increasing employment risks versus rewards and declining levels of authority, and resources for executives to properly manage and implement assigned programs.

Those who answered yes to the question of whether they had encouraged talented employees to apply for SES and SP positions were also asked how their encouragement

*“I encourage highly qualified candidates to apply to the SES because we need them; but it is much harder than in years past because being a senior executive is MUCH less attractive and less so every year.”*

was received. Just over 38% of respondents reported their encouragement was *often met with interest* and 8.6% indicated their encouragement was *always met with interest*. Just over 38% reported their encouragement was only *sometimes met with interest*, while about 8% indicated their encouragement was either *rarely or never met with interest*.



In another related question, survey participants were asked how they would rate the level of interest that high quality GS-14 and GS-15 (or equivalent) employees have in applying for career SES and SP positions in their agency. An almost equal percentage responded that they view the level of interest as very high or high (33%) versus low or very low (31%). The remaining respondents (just over 34%) pegged the level of interest as moderate or were not sure (1%). Those respondents with five years or less in their positions tended to be more positive regarding perceived levels of interest by GS-14s and 15s than those serving six or more years in their jobs, as did respondents with no plans to retire in the foreseeable future (within the next 5 years).

*“I cannot name a single top employee who is interested in becoming a SES. This should absolutely scare the heck out of all of us.”*

## Key Finding 4

4. **Most agencies are taking some steps to prepare, encourage, and/or gauge the level of interest of high potential employees in SES and SP positions; however, agencies' pipelines are not necessarily replete with high quality candidates.**

Survey respondents reported that their agencies, in most cases, are increasingly recognizing the importance of succession planning, executive development and other initiatives to identify, train and encourage high potential employees to prepare for and pursue senior executive and professional positions. Notwithstanding these efforts, respondents expressed some skepticism regarding whether their agencies have good pipelines of highly qualified employees who are ready and able to fill future SES and SP positions.

*“We have not provided GS-15s and 14s with the breadth of experience and knowledge they need to fill higher level positions. They’ve been in same positions for too long without opportunities for growth and development.”*

In response to a question whether their agencies are making any special efforts to prepare, encourage, or gauge the level of interest of highly qualified GS-15s (or equivalents) or other potential

talented candidates in seeking opportunities for employment in SES and SP positions, almost 55% of respondents said yes, almost 27% said no and about 19% indicated they were not sure.

Those who responded yes were also asked to select from a list of choices the types of initiatives their agencies were engaged in as well as to specify things that were not on the list. A summary of these results are as follows: over 63% indicated their agencies had formal supervisory or management development programs; 62% reported their agencies had formal SES candidate development programs; 55% reported formal managerial mentoring programs; and 41% reported formal agency succession planning programs.

Other agency efforts identified by significant percentages of respondents included formal job rotation programs (26%), informational interviews for GS-15 or equivalents with SES, SL and/or ST employees (14%), and employee focus groups to discuss senior management or professional jobs (11%). Some respondents indicated they have taken it upon themselves to devise methods to prepare the next generation of senior leaders.

*“I generally encourage people to apply to the SES and I use the ECQs as a tool in guiding my ‘mentees’ along their career development paths.”*

In another related area of inquiry, the survey asked participants, “Generally

*speaking, do you believe your agency has a good pipeline of highly qualified GS-15 (or equivalent) employees who are ready and able to fill future SES, SL and/or ST positions?”* Just over 42% answered yes, and just over 49% answered either no (36.6%) or not sure (12.7%).

Generally speaking, do you believe your agency has a good pipeline of highly qualified GS-15 (or equivalent) employees who are ready and able to fill future SES, SL and/or ST positions?



*“We have an excellent cadre of GS-15s but most lack hands-on experience to step in now to do what’s needed.”*

Another 9% provided various comments and perspectives including the view that their agencies’ pipelines were good for some types of positions

but not others as well as views that commented on shortcomings in certain areas of technical, managerial or leadership capabilities. On this question, those SES and SP respondents with 5 years or less in their positions were more negative on having a good pipeline in place than those with six or more years in their jobs.

*“We need good people in the pipeline now to extract the tacit knowledge from those eligible to go before they do go.”*

## Key Finding 5

### 5. To be successful, today's senior executives and professionals need different types of skills, abilities and experiences than in the past.

To better understand the type of capabilities that make for high quality candidates for today's career SES and SP jobs, the survey focused on whether candidates need new and different types of abilities to enhance success should they be selected. In response to a survey question asking whether career executives and professionals of today need different types of skills, experiences and/or abilities than in the past, approximately two thirds (65.3%) responded, "yes," while just about one fifth (20.6%) responded, "no." A little over 14% indicated they were not sure. Those respondents serving in their positions five years or less were more inclined to answer yes than individuals serving for 10 or more years.

Those who answered yes to this question were also asked to choose from a list of options the various types of capabilities that today's SES and SP employees need. In addition to selecting from the list, respondents were also invited to write-in their own ideas – and many did. Following, in descending order, is a summary of respondents' ratings of various factors:

Skill, Ability or Experience Needed by Today's SES or SP	% Respondents Agree
Managing Diverse, Multigenerational Workforces	80.4%
Collaboration Skills	78.2%
Change Management Skills/Experience	77.1%
Employee Engagement Capabilities	67.6%
Coaching/Counseling Skills	58.6%
Social Media Skills	58.6%
Cross-Agency Experience	55.6%

*"I believe there should be more cross-agency executive exchange programs, and opportunities to do the same with the private sector. In many ways, the federal community is too insular."*

resilience, team building, IT literacy, business acumen and management skills, employee/leadership development capabilities, communication and facilitation skills, and employee/labor relations capabilities.

Numerous other ideas on needed capabilities were offered by respondents. Some of the types of skills, abilities and experiences mentioned most frequently included:

*"Resiliency is a top ability that is needed in the SES. Executives must be able to focus on long term goals despite distractions, budget cuts, political and media derailments and other things outside their control."*

## Key Finding 6

**6. Currently, attractors to serving in career SES and SP positions only somewhat outweigh detractors. Detailed responses by survey participants provide important insights into the opportunities and challenges facing the federal government’s executive resources management system, including how the current climate is impacted by the actions of Congress and Inspectors General.**

Survey participants were asked, all things considered, if they believed the attractors to serving in career SES, SL and ST positions outweigh the detractors. Participants were also given lists of potentially attractive and unattractive features about the SES, SL and ST systems and asked to rate them.

On the question of whether attractors outweigh detractors, approximately 47% indicated they do. An almost equal percentage indicated they do not agree that attractors outweigh detractors (30%) or are not sure (18%). Just over 5% provided other answers that, for the most part, reflected mixed feelings such as, *“I used to think they did but based on the current climate not so sure anymore;”* or *“Yes for me personally, however, based on my engagement/mentorship with many GS-15/14 managers, the general population of potential future SES feel attractors do not outweigh detractors.”* Not surprisingly, those respondents who indicated they plan to retire or resign within the next year tended to be more negative in their responses while those with no plans to retire in the foreseeable future were more positive.

Regarding those features of the SES and SP systems that respondents found most attractive and most unattractive, the following charts list those features that were most highly rated (with “great extent” being the highest rating for each feature followed by “moderate extent”). See Appendix D for a complete summary.

### **FEATURES SEEN AS MOST ATTRACTIVE (ATTRACTORS)**

Feature	Great Extent	Moderate Extent
Ability to Contribute More to the Mission of my Agency	73.6%	17.5%
Opportunity to Make Major Positive Contributions/Impacts	72.6%	21%
The Honor of Serving at the Highest Level	62.1%	19.4%
Increased Responsibility and Authority	56%	30.5%
Managing People and Programs	50%	31%
Greater Opportunity for Creativity and/or Innovation	44.9%	32.4%
Ability to Interact at High Levels (with Political or Career Staff)	36.8%	27.1%

Other features, including the ability of SES and SP employees to carry over annual leave (up to 720 hours) from year to year, the ability to receive performance awards/bonuses and increased pay were seen as only modestly attractive. Not seen as very attractive were eligibility for last move home benefits, SES sabbaticals, or the ability to receive Presidential Rank Awards. In regard to features involving pay, bonuses and awards, some respondents commented that these possibilities are minimal at their agencies.

Interestingly enough, the top attractors listed by SES and SP respondents in this recruitment climate survey are very similar to the attractors identified in 2009 by GS-15 and 14 respondents in the survey attendant to SEA's *Taking the Helm* report (see also page 35 of this report). For example, *the ability to contribute to the mission of their agencies and the honor of serving at the highest level* were both rated among the top three attractors in both surveys.

#### **FEATURES SEEN AS MOST UNATTRACTIVE (DETRACTORS)**

Feature	Great Extent	Moderate Extent
Insufficient Financial Incentives	45.5%	21.5%
Lack of Assured Annual Inflationary Pay Adjustments	36.3%	22.2%
Ineffective Performance Management System	33.7%	23.7%
Negative Impact on Balance of Work/Family Responsibilities	32%	23.9%
Lack of Locality Pay	31.4%	16.7%
Lack of Recognition for Good Work Performance	31%	24.9%
Lack of Sufficient Authority to Meet Goals	29.8%	27.6%

Other features, including the increased job risk and loss of General Schedule job rights and dissatisfaction with agency leadership and direction were seen as only modestly detracting. Not seen as particularly unattractive were increased responsibility attendant to SES and SP positions, risk of geographic relocation and increased interaction with political appointees. Generally speaking, those respondents with no plans to retire within the foreseeable future were somewhat less negative in their rating of unattractive features of the SES and SP systems than those who indicated they have plans to leave within the next 5 years.

*“I feel a great need to serve our country, even given the externally generated difficulties (e.g., continuous attacks by Congress and the lack of defending SES by the Administration).”*

Unlike the general parallelism in results between this survey and SEA's 2009 survey with regard to attractors, the detractors rated most highly

in this survey were dissimilar to the ones ranked highest in 2009. The greatest change in these most recent results is the emphasis by respondents on insufficient pay and financial incentives as well as ineffective performance management systems and recognition for good performance. Respondents to SEA's 2009 survey, on the other hand, focused more on their fear of being geographically reassigned or transferred, concerns about balancing work and family responsibilities (although this was also rated quite highly by this survey's respondents), complexity of the application process, and increased job risk/loss of GS job rights.

This perceptible shift is consistent with SEA's view that lack of fair compensation and meaningful pay for

*“Pay compression, lack of meaningful incentives, and long hours are and will strip government of the ‘best and the brightest.’ ”*



performance (with attendant financial incentives and recognition for good performance) for career Senior Executives

*“It is time to acknowledge that the concept of ‘pay for performance’ does not exist – the SES performance management system needs to be rethought.”*

and Senior Professionals is creating increasingly dangerous recruitment and retention vulnerabilities in the federal executive personnel system – ones that are and will continue to threaten the nation’s well-being.

Also, due to overburdening workloads and the increasing stresses and frustrations of managing in today’s difficult political and budgetary climate, the issue of work/family balance may become even more critical to recruiting younger, high quality candidates. Indeed, respondents to this survey

*“Work-life balance is critical to our up and coming superstars – and there is none in the SES environment.”*

occupying their positions for less than 5 years (and ostensibly younger than the overall average SES and SP corps) rated *negative impact on balance of work and family responsibilities* as more

unattractive than did other survey respondents with longer tenure in their jobs.

In separate questions, survey participants were also asked to what extent (1) *Congressional micromanagement of agencies and negative comments towards career executives and professionals* and (2) *Heightened emphasis on Inspector General complaints and investigations work to: discourage potential candidates in applying for SES and SP jobs; encourage career SES and SP employees to retire or resign; and inhibit risk taking, creativity and innovation.* The percentage of respondents who indicated they believe these things adversely affect SES and SP applicants and current employees to a *great or moderate extent* are as follows.

Question	Discourage Potential Applicants	Encourage SES/SP Retirements/Resignations	Inhibit Risk Taking, Creativity, Innovation
Congressional Micro-Management/Negativity	80%	75%	83%
Heightened Emphasis on IG Complaints/Investigations	53%	52%	65%

*“Congressional and public attacks and negative IG reports that are reported in highly distorted ways are not adequately defended by the Administration.”*



## Conclusion and Recommendations

In recent years the Senior Executives Association has chronicled the negative impact on the federal SES and SP workforces and personnel systems brought about by Administration, Congressional and agency reductions in financial and moral support and backing for career Senior Executives and Senior Professionals. The congressional attacks and diminishing Administration support for current career SES and SP employees, in SEA's view, has directly contributed to increased turnover, diminished risk taking and innovation, reduced job satisfaction and workload stresses and imbalances that, in turn, are imperiling effective government management and operations.

*“My agency is an employee-friendly, supervisor-unfriendly agency. Hours for SES are much longer, more stress, more responsibility but little pay differential and substantially smaller bonuses than in the past.”*

Based on the results of this most recent SEA recruitment climate survey, it now appears the lack of support, coupled with the pervading

negative political climate and the “gotcha” mentality surrounding the federal workforce (and especially career Senior Executives and Senior Professionals), is increasingly casting a pall on the attractiveness of pursuing and serving in SES and SP positions by high-quality, potential internal and external job candidates. In short, the continued brain-drain of existing Senior Executives and Senior Professionals, combined with the increasing paucity of interest among high quality candidates to replace them, spells deepening, urgent trouble for the career leadership corps and the critical government programs and processes it manages. These concerns were underscored by survey data and in very high numbers of written narrative

comments provided by survey respondents.

*“We have broken the system and it will only get worse. In 5 years it will be too late to see what we did wrong today.”*

With these challenges in mind, SEA strongly recommends that the Administration, Congress, OPM and federal agencies:

- **Significantly improve financial, work-life, and other forms of support and recognition for career Senior Executives and Senior Professionals.**
- **Aggressively design and implement effective succession planning, mentoring, executive exchange and other leadership development and outreach programs that will help encourage and prepare high potential candidates for future SES and SP vacancies.**
- **Provide career Senior Executives and Senior Professionals with the resources needed to do their jobs and the authority, responsibility and accountability to do them right.**
- **Provide timely and focused training on the new and emerging skills, abilities and experiences (e.g., collaboration, managing multi-generational, diverse workforces) needed by today's SES and SP employees to be successful.**

- **Show visible support and provide meaningful recognition for the accomplishments and value to the nation of career Senior Executives and Senior Professionals.**
- **OPM and agencies should emphasize the positive aspects of serving in career SES and Senior Professional positions in order to help attract and recruit highly qualified candidates.**
- **OPM and agencies should continue simplifying the job application process for career SES and SP positions while maintaining important safeguards against politicization and acceptance of under-qualified candidates.**

Based on SEA's continuing research and observations, time is running short to make these and other

crucial changes to the career senior management system sufficient to stem the worrisome recruitment and retention trends that are currently evolving.

*“The reluctance of many bright, energetic folks to consider SES positions has to be reckoned with - not all of it is pay related.”*

More evidence of current problems comes from an exit survey of retiring and otherwise departing career SES conducted by OPM during 2013 and 2014. Survey results bear out both the challenges and potential opportunities related to improving executive recruitment and retention strategies. For example, the results confirmed that agencies themselves can make a major difference in whether or not executives choose to stay in their organization. In this regard, although a strong majority of those

*“Dissatisfaction of current SESs probably has the greatest impact on recruitment. Empower the current SES workforce and get them excited – and that will, in turn, put the jobs in a positive light and positively impact recruitment.”*

surveyed (70%) indicated no efforts had been made to encourage them to stay, many indicated that their decision to leave might have been changed by an increase in pay, verbal encouragement to stay based on their value to the organization, better work-life balance, increased autonomy in decision

making, and/or an award to recognize their performance and job contributions.

SEA has offered many specific ideas on how laws, regulations and working conditions related to enhanced executive recruitment and retention can be improved and stands ready to work collaboratively with all parties on pursuing recommendations on improving the attractiveness and viability of the federal career senior leadership system. To this end, SEA believes relatively small investments of resources and commitment can produce substantial dividends for the federal government and the American public it serves. The time for action is now!

*“Unless there is change in salary and working conditions, I think the SES will collapse under its own weight. There is no one in my organization that wants my job.”*

# More Narrative Comments

## Executive Leadership

*“There is a continuing need for high caliber, dedicated employees with leadership qualities despite the negatives.”*

*“The SES needs good people and good people need the challenge and satisfaction of being in a position to lead.”*

*“While I concur there are a lot of morale sapping issues in the workplace today, I still think being an SES, especially outside of Washington, is a great opportunity to impact positive change.”*

*“You have to be dedicated to the mission and to management/leadership to be willing to make the personal sacrifice needed.”*

*“Being an SES involves more independence and impact on what gets done and how it gets done.”*

*“My vision of the SES is in leading and inspiring the workforce to go beyond what they can expect from themselves.”*

## Encouraging the Next Generation

*“I believe my agency’s mission is one that is very meaningful to high quality candidates, and I believe, as an SES member, I have responsibility for ensuring that the talent pipeline continues to flow.”*

*“It’s best to tell the truth to GS-15s so they will know what it is like to be in the SES. Hopefully, the lack of candidates will force changes in salary and better working conditions.”*

*“I tell those considering the SES that the forms of compensation are not commensurate with the sizable upswing in professional risk and minimal monetary compensation increase.”*

*“I view encouragement of highly qualified GS-15s to apply for SES/SL/ST positions as a fundamental responsibility of existing SES members. It’s part of mentoring and a fundamental responsibility of ensuring continuity of mission success.”*

*“There is no longer any prestige associated with this once elite cadre. I tell talented GS-15 about the private sector, where the same level of responsibility (as SES) comes with 3-15 times the annual salary.”*

*“I am reluctant to recommend SES to GS-15s because so many good years can count next to nothing in a heartbeat if the political boss doesn’t like you.”*

*“I focus on succession planning. If an employee expresses an interest in becoming a Senior Executive I work with them and prepare them to be ready to apply.”*

*“We need the next generation to develop to improve government service to the public and defense of the country.”*

### **Recruitment, Turnover, and Succession Planning**

*“We have observed an increase in senior leadership retirements and turnover, which has increased our focus on succession planning, recruitment and career planning.”*

*“One of the biggest skill areas lacking in SES candidates is the ability to manage budget. Folks need to know how to run a program, project and organization.”*

*“When applying for SES in other agencies I have noticed that the technical qualifications are written such that unless you work in that agency you likely could not meet them.”*

*“Sequestration, questions about funding levels, and where we are now in the political cycle make it very difficult to recruit top talent.”*

*“I am disappointed that my Department does not put more emphasis on recruiting SES from the ranks of SESCDP graduates. Why have a SESCDP if you are not going to use the people who graduate from the program? ”*

*“The ECQ requirement discourages people from applying.”*

## **The SES System**

*“Change must occur for the SES to remain viable.”*

*“The SES still provides an enhanced opportunity to make a meaningful contribution to the nation’s welfare. It is also a good springboard to opportunities outside of the government.”*

*“I believe the new OPM process is not resulting in the best qualified candidates making it through the ‘assessment center’ process.”*

*“Private sector employees generally find it too difficult to get in.”*

*“As a whole we do a lousy job of preparing GS-14/15s for the SES.”*

*“Senior Executives should be given the authority and pay and latitude to be innovative.”*

*“Give the SES back the prestige, recognition that this group deserves and needs for proper recruitment, development and retention.”*

*“Most SES mobility assignments I see are focused on technical skills and not executive leadership and management. Yet, the greatest shortfall I see among my peers is in executive-level decision making.”*

*“The SES has become a system that discourages calculated risk taking, innovation and creativity despite all the rhetoric.”*

## **Detractors**

*“The SES role has lost its appeal. Honestly, it’s difficult to promote SES/SL and ST positions.”*

*“The environment is too hostile, the risk personally/professionally far too great, compensation FAR below market rate. I’m 15 years from retirement and even though I have 20 years as a federal employee I am leaving for the private sector.”*

*“Based on my engagement/mentorship of many GS-14/15s managers, the general population of potential future SES feel attractors do not outweigh detractors.”*

*“Pay will always be a disincentive when a talented GS-15 can out-earn an SES while having less responsibility.”*

*“SES was the capstone of my career but I would not now encourage anyone to do it. I’m leaving because of the atmosphere and lack of support and pay.”*

*“Once in the SES corps I’ve found that SES are micromanaged by political appointees to the point where they have less authority than I had as a GS-14.”*

*“The current climate discourages new entrants to the SES.”*

*“The issue with lack of recognition and pay commensurate with responsibilities need to be addressed urgently or the quality of the SES corps will degrade beyond recovery.”*

*“SES pay and the levels of respect and authority are so low, that the best of the best are no longer very interested in serving at this level.”*

*“I fear as generational changes occur in the workplace, more and more quality people will not be interested in SES positions.”*

*“It’s a tough climate. Many highly qualified individuals have taken a pass on opportunities because they concluded it just isn’t worth it.”*

### **General Comments**

*“We suffer from a lack of resources to get the job done – with an expectation that it will get done anyway.”*

*“If our SES corps is so incompetent and not as bright and talented as the private sector, why do major consulting firms vie to attract them to their companies when executives retire?”*

*“I came from the private sector. I miss it. You can accomplish more. Pay and bonuses are good.”*

# Appendix A: Survey Instrument

## SEA Survey of Career Senior Executive and Professional Recruitment Climate

At the Morning of Reflections discussion that preceded the April 2015 SEA Banquet honoring Presidential Rank Award winners for 2014, a number of the awardees in attendance raised concerns about the attractiveness of current Senior Executive Service (SES) and Senior Professional (SP) positions to talented, high performing career employees from within and outside the Federal government. Although the award winners cited many rewards of serving the nation during their careers, they also expressed fears that pay stagnation, reduced rewards and recognition, and the constant pillorying of career SES and SP employees by Congress and the media are likely taking a toll on attracting talented, potential job candidates.

Several attendees expressed the view that reduced interest among talented potential candidates in serving in SES and SP positions could negatively impact the viability and capability of the entire career senior executive corps. Some worried that recruitment difficulties could jeopardize successful operational execution and mission accomplishment across the federal government. It was also noted that these and other potential problems could be especially grave, given the large number of expected retirements in the SES and SP ranks over the next few years.

With these concerns in mind, SEA has decided to survey its members to get their views on the current SES and SP recruitment climate within federal agencies, including the factors that are serving as attractors and detractors to potential SES and SP job candidates in terms of their interest in serving in these positions. **This survey focuses mostly on those executives who have recent experience in recruiting for and attempting to fill SES and SP vacancies.** Survey results will be shared with you and all other SEA members.

SEA urges your participation in this very important survey. The survey should take no more than 15 to 25 minutes to complete. Thank you in advance for your timely participation!

**1. Are you a member of the Senior Executives Association?**

- Yes
- No

**DEMOGRAPHICS AND AGENCY AFFILIATION QUESTIONS:**

**2. Gender**

- Male
- Female

**3. What is your type of appointment or grade level?**

- Senior Executive Service
- Scientific or Professional (ST)
- Senior Level (SL)
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_



**4. How long have you served in your current appointment or grade level?**

- Fewer than two years
- Two to Five years
- Six to 10 years
- Over 10 years

**5. Are you planning to retire or resign in the foreseeable future?**

- Yes, within the next year
- Yes, within the next two to three years
- Yes, within the next four to five years
- No plans to retire or resign in the foreseeable future

**6. In what agency do you currently work?**

*<drop down box of major agencies here>*

Other: please specify

**RECRUITMENT CLIMATE QUESTIONS**

**7. Have you been actively involved (e.g., as a hiring manager, selecting official, approving official, serving on an Executive Resources Board (ERB), serving on a Qualifications Review Board (QRB), as a responsible HR official) in recruiting, attempting to fill, or in selecting a candidate for an SES, SL or ST position at any time in the past two years?**

- Yes, actively involved
- No (Skip to question 21)

**8. In what capacity were or are you currently actively involved in recruiting for, attempting to fill, and/or selecting a career SES, ST or SL position (check all that apply)?**

- Hiring Manager
- Selecting or Approving Official
- Serving on ERB
- Serving on a QRB
- Responsible HR Official
- Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

**9. Please think about SES, SL and/or ST job applicants over the past two years for which you are familiar. How would you rate the quality of these applicants – both internal (i.e., from within your agency or another Federal agency) and external (from outside the federal government)?**

**Very High                      High                      Moderate                      Low                      Very Low                      Not Sure**

- Internal Applicants
- External Applicants

**10. To what extent, if at all, has the overall quality of internal and external candidates for career SES, SL and/or ST job vacancies in your agency changed in the past two years?**

**Much higher quality now, Slightly higher quality now, About the Same, Slightly lower quality now,  
Much lower quality now, Not Sure**

- Internal Candidates
- External Candidates



- 11. Thinking specifically about job vacancies within the past two years, how would you rate the level of ease or difficulty that your agency has experienced in attracting high quality personnel to apply for career SES, SL and ST positions?**
- Very Easy
  - Somewhat Easy
  - Neither Easy or Difficult
  - Somewhat Difficult
  - Very Difficult
  - Not Sure
- 12. Generally speaking, how would you rate the amount of time that it takes your agency to fill career SES, SL and/or ST positions?**
- Too Slow
  - About Right (Skip to Question 14)
  - Not Sure (Skip to Question 14)
- 13. To what extent, if at all, has the slowness of filling a SES, SL and/or ST position contributed to problems in attracting a sufficient number of highly qualified candidates?**
- Great Extent
  - Moderate Extent
  - Somewhat
  - Very Little
  - Not at All
  - Not Sure
- 14. To what extent, if at all, are you concerned about the ability of your agency to fill career SES, SL and/or ST vacancies with highly qualified candidates?**
- Great Extent
  - Moderate Extent
  - Somewhat
  - Very Little
  - Not at All
  - Not Sure
- 15. How would you rate the level of interest that high quality GS-14 and GS-15 (or equivalent) employees have in applying for career SES, SL and/or ST positions in your department or agency?**
- Very high
  - High
  - Moderate
  - Low
  - Very Low
  - Not Sure

**16. To what extent, if at all, do you believe the following factors in contribute to difficulty in attracting highly qualified candidates for SES, SL and/or ST positions?**

**Great Extent, Moderate Extent, Somewhat, Very Limited Extent, Not at All, Not Sure**

- Promotion to SES/SL/ST pay not accompanied by meaningful salary increase
- Risk of Geographic Relocation
- Complexity of the application process
- Difficulty of SES/SL/ST Jobs Themselves (e.g., increased demands, stress, complexity)
- Insufficient Overall Compensation and/or Lack of Financial Incentives in SES, SL and/or ST jobs
- Political Climate Within the Agency
- Increased Interaction with Political Appointees
- Concerns about Agency Leadership and/or Direction
- Concerns about Lack of Authority/Resources to Get the Job Done
- Concerns about Work vs. Family Life Balance
- Increased Overall Job Risk (e.g., Loss of GS Job Rights and Protections)
- Heightened emphasis on IG complaints and investigations
- Punitive Congressional bills and unfavorable comments directed at career SES, SL, and or STs
- Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

**17. Thinking about the past two years, has your agency had any SES, SL and/or ST vacancies that have remained unfilled due to the lack of highly qualified candidates? (For purposes of this question, a vacancy occurs/begins when an incumbent changes to a new job or retires and the agency attempts to backfill the job.)**

- No (Skip to Question 21)
- Not Sure (Skip to Question 21)
- Yes

**18. If you answered "Yes" to the previous question, how long were the vacancies unfilled due to lack of highly qualified candidates? If you answered "No" or "Not sure" to the previous question (16), do not select an answer below.**

- Fewer than six months
- Six months to one year
- Longer than one year
- Not sure

**19. Is your agency making any special efforts to prepare, encourage or gauge the level of interest of highly qualified GS-15s (or equivalent) or other potential talented candidates in seeking opportunities for employment in SES, SL and/or ST positions?**

- No
- Not Sure
- Yes

**20. If you answered "Yes" to the previous question, please select all that apply below. If you answered "No" or "Not sure" to the previous question (18), do not select any answers below.**

- Formal SES Candidate Development Program
- Formal Agency Succession Planning Program(s)
- Formal Job Rotation Program for senior managers and/or professionals
- Formal Supervisory or Managerial Training Program(s)
- Formal Managerial Mentoring Program
- Employee Survey Gauging Interest in SES/SL/ST jobs
- Employee Focus Groups to discuss senior management or professional jobs
- Informational Interviews for GS 15s (or equivalent) with SES, SL and/or STs
- Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

**21. Given conditions in your agency, do you encourage highly qualified GS-15s (or equivalent) employees to apply for SES, SL and/or ST positions?**

- Yes
- No (Skip to question 24)
- Not Sure (Skip to question 24)

Please explain why: \_\_\_\_\_

**22. When you encourage highly qualified GS-15s (or equivalent) personnel to apply for SES, SL and/or ST positions, how is your encouragement received? (choose best answer):**

- Never met with interest
- Rarely met with interest
- Sometimes met with interest
- Often met with interest
- Always met with interest
- Not sure

**23. Generally speaking, do you believe your agency has a good pipeline of highly qualified GS-15 (or equivalent) employees who are ready and able to fill future SES, SL and/or ST positions?**

- Yes
- No
- Not Sure
- Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

**24. To what extent do each of the following make the SES, SL and/or ST system attractive to you?**

**Great Extent, Moderate Extent, Somewhat, Very Limited Extent, Not at All, Not Sure**

- Ability to contribute more to the mission of my agency.
- Increased responsibility and authority
- Greater opportunity for creativity and/or innovation
- The ability to interact at high levels (e.g., with both political appointees and career executives)
- The honor of serving at the highest career level
- Increased pay
- Ability to receive Presidential Rank Awards
- Ability to receive other performance awards/bonuses
- Annual leave carryover (up to 720 hours of annual leave can be carried over from year to year)
- Sabbaticals: Up to 11 months for study or uncompensated work experience
- Last move home: Entitled to moving expenses upon retirement if reassigned or transferred geographically
- Opportunity to make major positive contributions/impacts
- Managing people and programs
- Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

**25. To what extent do each of the following make the SES, SL and/or ST system unattractive to you?**

**Great Extent, Moderate Extent, Somewhat, Very Limited Extent, Not at All, Not Sure**

- Lack of sufficient authority to meet goals
- Insufficient Financial Incentives
- Lack of Locality Pay
- Negative Impact on Balance of Work and Family responsibilities
- Lack of Recognition for Good Job Performance
- Ineffective Performance Management System
- Increased Responsibility
- Lack of assured annual pay adjustment to reflect inflation
- Increased Interaction with Political Appointees
- Dissatisfaction with Agency Leadership and/or Direction
- Being Reassigned or Transferred Geographically
- Increased Job Risk/Loss of GS Job Rights
- Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

**26. All things considered, do you believe attractors to serving in career SES, SL and ST positions outweigh detractors?**

- Yes
- No
- Not Sure
- Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

**27. To what extent do you believe the Congressional micromanagement of agencies and negative comments towards career executives and professionals work to:**

**Great Extent, Moderate Extent, Somewhat, Very Limited Extent, Not at All, Not Sure**

- Discourage potential candidates for SES, SL and/or ST positions from applying for job vacancies
- Encourage career SES, SL and/or ST employees to retire or resign from government
- Inhibit risk taking, creativity and innovation by career SES, SL and/or ST employees

**28. To what extent do you believe heightened emphasis on Inspector General complaints and investigations work to:**

**Great Extent, Moderate Extent, Somewhat, Very Limited Extent, Not at All, Not Sure**

- Discourage potential candidates for SES, SL and/or ST positions from applying for job vacancies
- Encourage career SES, SL and/or ST employees to retire or resign from government
- Inhibit risk taking, creativity and innovation by career SES, SL and/or ST employees

**29. Do career senior executive and professional employees of today need different types of qualifications, skills, experiences and/or abilities than in the past?**

- No (Skip to question 31)
- Not sure (Skip to question 31)
- Yes

**30. If you answered "Yes" to the previous question, please specify below different skills, qualifications, abilities needed – check all that apply. If you answered "No" or "Not sure" to the previous question, do not select any answers below.**

- Collaboration Skills
- Cross-Agency Experience
- Coaching/Counseling Skills
- Employee Engagement Capabilities
- Managing Diverse, Multigenerational Workforces
- Social Media Skills
- Change Management Skills/Experience
- Others (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

**31. Please use this space to provide any additional thoughts/comments/concerns you may have regarding the current recruitment climate (including challenges and opportunities) facing federal agencies in attracting highly talented individuals to fill SES, SL and/or ST positions.**

## Appendix B: *Taking the Helm* Attractors/Detractors

***The most significant attractors for considering an SES or Senior Professional position are the ability to contribute more to the mission of the agency, greater opportunity for creativity and innovation, the honor of serving at the highest level, and increased responsibility and authority.***

Most jobs have positive factors that draw people to consider serving in the position; these positive factors are referred to as “attractors” in this report. In the survey of GS-14/15 employees, respondents were asked directly about the following 11 attractors to serving in SES and/or Senior Professional positions:

- Ability to contribute more to the mission of my agency
- Increased responsibility and authority
- Greater opportunity for creativity and innovation
- The ability to interact at higher levels (e.g., with both political appointees and career executives)
- The honor of serving at the highest career level
- Increased pay
- Ability to receive Presidential Rank Awards
- Ability to receive other performance awards
- Annual leave carryover: Up to 720 hours of annual leave can be carried over from year to year
- Sabbaticals: Up to 11 months for study or uncompensated work experience (not applicable to Senior Professional positions)
- Last move home: Entitled to moving expenses upon retirement under certain circumstances if reassigned or transferred geographically (not applicable to Senior Professional positions)

Survey respondents viewed the top attractors (i.e., highest positive 4 factors) to serving in SES and Senior Professional positions as the ability to contribute more to the mission of the agency, greater opportunity for creativity and innovation, the honor of serving at the highest level, and increased responsibility and authority. These positive factors highlight the importance of growth, responsibility, and achievement in attracting individuals to these senior federal positions. Our review of the narrative comments made by respondents to the survey did not identify any additional key attractors that were unrelated to the 11 factors we directly addressed in the survey.

***The most significant detractors for considering an SES or Senior Professional position are the potential negative impact on the balance of work and family responsibilities, the possibility of being reassigned or transferred geographically, and the complexity of the application process.***

In addition to the positive aspects that make a job attractive to prospective applicants, many jobs also have negative factors that dissuade people from considering the position, which are referred to as “detractors” in this report. In the survey of GS-14/15 employees, respondents were asked directly about the following 11 detractors to serving in SES and/or Senior Professional positions:

- Complexity of the application process
- Increased responsibility

- Lack of sufficient authority to meet goals
- Insufficient financial incentives
- Ineffective SES or SL/ST performance management system
- Potential negative impact on balance of work and family responsibilities
- Increased interaction with political appointees
- Being reassigned or transferred geographically (not applicable to Senior Professional positions)
- Lack of locality pay
- Lack of an assured annual pay adjustment to reflect inflation
- Increased job risk/loss of GS job rights (not applicable to Senior Professional positions)

Respondents to the GS-14/15 survey viewed the top detractor to serving in SES and Senior Professional positions as the potential negative impact on balance of work and family responsibilities. As a whole, GS-14/15 survey respondents in younger age ranges were more likely to rate the potential negative impact on the balance of work and family responsibilities as unattractive. For example, for those respondents with potential interest in SES positions, 50% of those under age 40 rated work/life balance as a significant detractor vs. 41% of those aged 50 and older. For those respondents with potential interest in SL/ST positions, 49% of those under age 40 rated the work/life balance as significant detractor vs. 32% of those aged 50 and older. Being reassigned or transferred geographically and the complexity of the application process were also top detractors (i.e., over 1/3 of respondents rated these as a detractor to a “great extent” or “very great extent”).

# Appendix C: Summary of Factors Contributing to Difficulty in Attracting Candidates

To what extent, if at all, do you believe the following factors contribute to difficulty in attracting highly qualified candidates for SES, SL and/or ST positions?							
Answer Options	Great Extent	Moderate Extent	Somewhat	Very Limited Extent	Not at All	Not Sure	Response Count
Promotion to SES/SL/ST pay not accompanied by meaningful salary increase	158 (51.6%)	79 (25.8%)	45 (14.7%)	21 (6.9%)	3 (0.98%)	0 (0.0%)	306
Risk of Geographic Relocation	53 (17.6%)	53 (17.6%)	70 (23.3%)	91 (30.2%)	32 (10.6%)	2 (0.7%)	301
Complexity of the application process	64 (20.98%)	99 (32.5%)	83 (27.2%)	44 (14.4%)	13 (4.3%)	2 (0.66%)	305
Difficulty of SES/SL/ST Jobs Themselves (e.g., increased demands, stress, complexity)	85 (27.9%)	98 (32.1%)	56 (18.4%)	48 (15.7%)	18 (5.9%)	0 (0.0%)	305
Insufficient Overall Compensation and/or Lack of Financial Incentives in SES, SL and/or ST jobs	174 (57.2%)	84 (27.6%)	28 (9.2%)	12 (3.9%)	5 (1.6%)	1 (0.33%)	304
Political Climate Within the Agency	95 (31.1%)	70 (23.0%)	62 (20.3%)	50 (16.4%)	26 (8.5%)	2 (0.66%)	305
Increased Interaction with Political Appointees	36 (11.8%)	54 (17.6%)	63 (20.6%)	93 (30.4%)	55 (18.0%)	5 (1.6%)	306
Concerns about Agency Leadership and/or Direction	67 (22.0%)	58 (19.1%)	59 (19.4%)	77 (25.3%)	43 (14.1%)	0 (0.0%)	304
Concerns about Lack of Authority/Resources to Get the Job Done	74 (24.3%)	91 (29.8%)	69 (22.6%)	49 (16.1%)	22 (7.2%)	0 (0.0%)	305
Concerns about Work vs. Family Life Balance	84 (27.5%)	104 (34.0%)	65 (21.2%)	38 (12.4%)	14 (4.6%)	1 (0.33%)	306
Increased Overall Job Risk (e.g., Loss of GS Job Rights and Protections)	78 (25.6%)	62 (20.3%)	51 (16.7%)	80 (26.2%)	31 (10.2%)	3 (0.98%)	305
Heightened emphasis on IG complaints and investigations	62 (20.3%)	72 (23.6%)	72 (23.6%)	52 (17.0%)	42 (13.8%)	5 (1.6%)	305
Punitive Congressional bills and unfavorable comments directed at career SES, SL, and or STs	122 (40.0%)	80 (26.2%)	53 (17.4%)	37 (12.1%)	10 (3.3%)	3 (0.98%)	305
Other (please specify)							24
<i>answered question</i>							<b>306</b>
<i>skipped question</i>							<b>176</b>



## Appendix D: Summary of Attractors/Detractors

To what extent do each of the following make the SES, SL and/or ST system attractive to you?

Answer Options	Great Extent	Moderate Extent	Somewhat	Very Limited Extent	Not at All	Not Sure	Response Count
Ability to contribute more to the mission of my agency.	312 (73.6%)	74 (17.5%)	27 (6.4%)	5 (1.2%)	5 (1.2%)	1 (0.2%)	424
Increased responsibility and authority	237 (56.0%)	129 (30.5%)	39 (9.2%)	8 (1.9%)	8 (1.9%)	2 (0.5%)	423
Greater opportunity for creativity and/or innovation	190 (44.9%)	137 (32.4%)	56 (13.2%)	28 (6.6%)	11 (2.6%)	1 (0.2%)	423
The ability to interact at high levels (e.g., with both political appointees and career executives)	156 (37.0%)	115 (27.1%)	84 (19.8%)	44 (10.4%)	25 (5.9%)	0 (0.0%)	424
The honor of serving at the highest career level	262 (62.1%)	82 (19.4%)	44 (10.4%)	20 (4.7%)	14 (3.3%)	0 (0.0%)	422
Increased pay	91 (21.5%)	103 (24.3%)	88 (20.8%)	77 (18.2%)	62 (14.7%)	2 (0.5%)	423
Ability to receive Presidential Rank Awards	38 (9.0%)	39 (9.3%)	73 (17.3%)	124 (29.5%)	136 (32.3%)	11 (2.6%)	421
Ability to receive other performance awards/bonuses	73 (17.3%)	81 (19.2%)	109 (25.8%)	83 (19.7%)	75 (17.8%)	1 (0.2%)	422
Annual leave carryover (up to 720 hours of annual leave can be carried over from year to year)	102 (24.1%)	104 (24.9%)	97 (22.9%)	59 (13.9%)	61 (14.4%)	0 (0.0%)	423
Sabbaticals: Up to 11 months for study or uncompensated work experience	23 (5.4%)	20 (4.7%)	51 (12.1%)	69 (16.3%)	212 (50.1%)	48 (11.3%)	423
Last move home: Entitled to moving expenses upon retirement if reassigned or transferred geographically	36 (8.5%)	34 (8.0%)	60 (14.2%)	78 (18.4%)	193 (45.6%)	22 (5.2%)	423
Opportunity to make major positive contributions/impacts	308 (72.6%)	89 (21.0%)	15 (3.5%)	6 (1.4%)	5 (1.2%)	1 (0.2%)	424
Managing people and programs	211 (50.0%)	131 (31.0%)	52 (12.3%)	14 (3.3%)	12 (2.8%)	2 (0.5%)	422
Other (please specify)							24
<i>answered question</i>							<b>424</b>
<i>skipped question</i>							<b>58</b>

To what extent do each of the following make the SES, SL and/or ST system unattractive to you?

Answer Options	Great Extent	Moderate Extent	Somewhat	Very Limited Extent	Not at All	Not Sure	Response Count
Lack of sufficient authority to meet goals	125 (29.8%)	116 (27.6%)	83 (19.8%)	58 (13.8%)	38 (9.1%)	0 (0.0%)	420
Insufficient Financial Incentives	192 (45.4%)	91 (21.5%)	79 (18.7%)	36 (8.5%)	25 (5.9%)	0 (0.0%)	423
Lack of Locality Pay	132 (31.4%)	70 (16.7%)	72 (17.1%)	71 (16.9%)	66 (15.7%)	9 (2.1%)	420
Negative Impact on Balance of Work and Family responsibilities	135 (32.0%)	101 (23.9%)	92 (21.8%)	68 (16.1%)	25 (5.9%)	1 (0.24%)	422
Lack of Recognition for Good Job Performance	131 (31.0%)	105 (24.9%)	88 (20.9%)	59 (14.0%)	39 (9.2%)	0 (0.0%)	422
Ineffective Performance Management System	142 (33.6%)	100 (23.7%)	83 (19.7%)	57 (13.5%)	38 (9.0%)	2 (0.5%)	422
Increased Responsibility	20 (4.8%)	39 (9.3%)	58 (13.8%)	99 (23.6%)	203 (48.4%)	0 (0.0%)	419
Lack of assured annual pay adjustment to reflect inflation	154 (36.3%)	94 (22.2%)	75 (17.7%)	54 (12.7%)	46 (10.8%)	1 (0.24%)	424
Increased Interaction with Political Appointees	46 (11.0%)	39 (9.3%)	59 (14.0%)	103 (24.5%)	173 (41.2%)	0 (0.0%)	420
Dissatisfaction with Agency Leadership and/or Direction	83 (19.6%)	60 (14.2%)	75 (17.7%)	86 (20.3%)	119 (28.1%)	0 (0.0%)	423
Risk of Geographic Location	37 (8.7%)	40 (9.4%)	76 (17.9%)	117 (27.6%)	152 (35.8%)	2 (0.5%)	424
Increased Job Risk/Loss of GS Job Rights	78 (18.5%)	69 (16.4%)	69 (16.4%)	82 (19.5%)	122 (29.0%)	1 (0.2%)	421
Other (please specify)							31
<i>answered question</i>							<b>424</b>
<i>skipped question</i>							<b>58</b>

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