

Career Opportunities in U.S. Federal Government

The US Federal Government is the largest employer in the United States. It is responsible for protecting the environment; regulating worker health and safety; ensuring the safety of the nation's food supply; overseeing air traffic control operations; curing AIDS; forging international partnerships in an era of globalization; fighting ongoing battles against poverty, homelessness, and illegal drug use; and conducting a global war against terrorism. At present, there are approximately 1.8 million civilian employees in the federal government.

Nearly all federal departments and agencies maintain an international affairs division. Federal job hunters are encouraged to explore a wide variety of agencies that may be involved with international policymaking.

Hiring within the federal government is decentralized. Each agency manages its own hiring and is best viewed as a separate employer. The US Office of Personnel Management (OPM) functions as the federal government's human resource division, regulates hiring practices and provides vacancy information for the entire federal government.

Career Paths and Entry Salaries

There are two main public sector tracks to consider: foreign service and civil service.

Foreign Service Officers spend the majority of their time outside the U.S., with occasional stateside rotations. The only means of entry into the Foreign Service is via the examination process and placements can take up to two years, so if this is a career path students are considering seriously, they should aim to take the written examination during the spring before or during their first year of a 2-year Master's program. The oral examination is offered at different times throughout the ensuing fall and winter. It can take up to a year to be placed following successful completion of the oral examination phase, as more candidates pass than there are positions to fill.

Civil Service positions can be gained through the competitive hiring process (i.e. government positions posted to usajobs.com and other sites) or through application to the Presidential Management Fellowship program, which is a 2-year, fast-track program for graduate students. There are also agency-specific fellowship programs that allow entrée into entry-level positions. Hiring for full-time civil service positions happens throughout the year as positions become open. The application process for the Presidential Management Fellowship Program starts in the early fall of a student's final year of graduate study.

Internships are technically available along both tracks, since the State Department internship offers placements either within the State Department bureaus in DC, or in embassies abroad. November 1 is a key government-wide deadline for many internships. State Department, CIA, DIA and many other internship applications are due on this date to allow for ample time in which to perform the necessary security clearance required of these positions. There are some specific internships that have a later application deadline, and many internships not requiring clearance may even have spring deadlines. Students should be aware of the Rosenthal Fellowship, which places U.S. and foreign nationals in internships within the DC federal community, including Capitol Hill. Applications for the Rosenthal Fellowship are normally due in mid February.

Though an appropriate position opening cannot be guaranteed for all returning interns within their respective agencies, the internship experience can greatly increase the chances of an intern's employment within the same agency where the internship experience has been a mutually rewarding one. Despite a rigid civil service competitive process, insider connections and recommendations can weigh heavily on the hiring decision and some agencies even see their internship program as a direct feeder for future full-time offers (OMB, CIA, Treasury, Fed).

There is currently a notable backlog for security clearances and because of the time and expense they incur, they are worth their weight in gold. Anyone even considering work with the U.S. government that requires a security clearance is strongly encouraged to complete a summer internship that gains them a basic clearance. This will make them considerably more marketable when it comes time for their full-time search.

Most white collar federal jobs fall under the "General Schedule" or "GS" pay scale. Under this system, jobs are ranked according to level of responsibility and difficulty, and are assigned corresponding "grades" and salaries.

College graduates with a four-year degree typically enter the system at GS-5 or GS-7. Master's level graduates usually enter at a GS-9 or higher, depending upon number of years of work experience. PhD graduates typically enter at GS-11 or higher. For some hard-to-fill positions agencies may be able to offer a "special pay rate" that allows them to offer more attractive salaries for selected occupations. Salaries can also rise quickly once employees have gained experience working in the government; for example, one can rise from GS-7 to GS-11 in two years which is nearly a 50% increase in pay.

A combination of three factors can help potential employees understand where they fall in the GS scale: education, experience, and location. Even if a candidate fall solidly into a specific GS level, there may be room for negotiation along the "steps" within that GS level that depend on these three factors. In the federal system, where an employee lives affects the amount he is paid because pay is adjusted for cost of living. This is called a "locality pay rate." To access the General Schedule and view locality pay rates, visit <http://www.opm.gov/oca/06tables/indexGS.asp>

The 2006 pay scale in Washington, DC, for example, goes like this:

GS-7 makes a starting salary of \$36,671
GS-9 makes a starting salary of \$44,856
GS-11 makes a starting salary of \$54,272
GS-12 makes a starting salary of \$65,048

Some graduates start at the GS-11 or GS-12 rate if they can show prior experience in a specific content area and/or prior federal experience.

The U.S. government is gradually moving from the General Schedule (GS) payment schedule to a new National Security Personnel System (NSPS). The NSPS system makes use of broader paybands and bases annual pay raises in part on performance ratings – it would therefore potentially allow for more rapid movement up the pay scale and would more directly reward those individuals who achieve high performance on the job. The new paybanding system is first being rolled-out in the Department of Defense and select other agencies.

Lastly, it's important to note that since the federal government offers opportunities in just about every field and at all levels, working for the federal government can be a great career builder, not simply a career.

The Partnership for Public Service's *Red White and Blue Jobs* publication contains accurate and concise information about federal salaries:

To access the General Schedule and see what you would earn according to where you live, visit: <http://www.opm.gov/oca/04tables/indexGS.asp>

Qualifications Necessary/Application Procedures to Enter Field

While careers with the federal government vary widely depending on the agency, here is a selection of skills that will be an asset to any federal job: Superior written and oral communication skills; excellent research and data analysis skills; demonstrated leadership; proven research and analytical abilities; ability to work in a team environment; and strong work ethic and dedication.

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The Office of Personal Management maintains a website dedicated to federal jobs and employment information called USAJOBS (url below). While all federal positions require candidates to complete the online application process, making connections with individuals (such as Maxwell alumni) and working in the agencies and/or departments that interest you is highly recommended. Pay special attention to the answers you provide in the online application as your responses serve as screening tools for OPM.

Sample Employers

- Department of Agriculture, www.usda.gov
- Department of Commerce, www.doc.gov
- Department of Defense, www.dod.gov; www.defenselink.mil
- Department of Energy, www.doe.gov
- Department of Health and Human Services, www.hhs.gov
- Department of Housing and Urban Development, www.hud.gov
- Department of the Interior, www.doi.gov
- Department of Justice, www.usdoj.gov
- Department of Labor, www.dol.gov
- Department of State, www.state.gov
- Department of Transportation, www.dot.gov
- Department of the Treasury, treas.gov
- Congressional Budget Office, www.cbo.gov
- Congressional Research Service, <http://www.loc.gov/crsinfo/>
- Environmental Protection Agency, www.epa.gov
- Central Intelligence Agency, www.cia.gov
- General Accounting Office, www.gao.gov
- National Security Council, www.whitehouse.gov/nsc
- Office of Management and Budget, www.whitehouse.gov/omb
- US Agency for International Development, usaid.gov
- US Trade Representative, ustr.gov

- Federal Reserve System, federalreserve.gov
- Export-Import Bank, <http://www.exim.gov/index.cfm>

Demand and Future Challenges of Profession

Federal employment is generally not affected by cyclical fluctuations in the economy as are other private sector industries, but political changes can influence staffing levels. Each presidential administration may have different public policy priorities that result in greater levels of federal employment in some programs and reductions in others. After an election is an especially opportune time to search for positions, since new congressional members or a new White House administration will need fresh staff. Hiring also is increased at the end of September – the end of the government’s fiscal year. Any leftover money is often used to fill vacancies, so start informational interviewing early to get ahead of the game.

Over the past decade or so, the federal government hired an average of 350,000 (non-postal) workers yearly to fill vacancies. Competition is keen for federal positions, especially in times of economic uncertainty. However, opportunities for entry-level positions are predicted to increase as many (an estimated 50-70%) supervisory positions become vacant due to retirement. The tried and true method for securing government positions is networking. Integrating yourself into the network can often be the quickest way to employment, therefore it is important to do your homework on which agencies or departments interest you most and start developing contacts.

As a result of 9/11, many agencies such as the Central Intelligence Agency, the Department of Defense, State, Health and Human Services, and Homeland Security, have seen a marked increase in the number of applicants.

A notable portion of the federal workforce (44% of its 1.9 million employees, including 60% of its senior managers) is expected to retire by 2010. This will leave a large vacuum in mid to upper level management that will need to be filled, and will require increased hiring at all levels over the next 5 years. The government has already begun an advertising campaign to try to bring in new talent, is under pressure to revamp its Presidential Fellowship Program to attract future leadership and has also begun to bolster the ranks of its HR to be able to handle the increase in applications.

Resources For More Information

Associations/Websites

- USA JOBS, <http://www.usajobs.gov/>
- Student Jobs, <http://www.usajobs.gov/studentjobs/>
- AvueCentral, www.avuecentral.com
- Federal Job Search, www.federaljobsearch.com
- FedWorld, www.fedworld.gov
- Government Guide, <http://www.guidetogov.org/>

Directories

Washington Information Directory

Publications

- Partnership for Public Service, www.calltoserve.org
- *Government Job Finder: Where the Jobs Are in Local, State, and Federal Government*, by Daniel Lauber and Jennifer Atkin, 2006.
- *Increasing your Odds: A Guide to Applying and Interviewing for Federal Jobs*, US Department of Interior, 1995.
- *Inside a U.S. Embassy: How the Foreign Service Works for America*, American Foreign Service Association, 2003.
- *Red, White & Blue Jobs, Finding a Great Job in the Federal Government*, brochure published by the Partnership for Public Service.
- *The Student's Federal Career Guide: 10 Steps to Find and Win Top Government Jobs and Internships*, K. Kraemer Troutman & E. Troutman, 2004.

In Career Library

- *An Insider's Guide to Political Jobs in Washington*, William T. Endicott, John Wiley and Sons (2003)
- *Career Opportunities in Politics, Government and Activism*, Joan Axelrod-Contrada, Facts on File (2003)
- *Federal Jobs: The Ultimate Guide*, 3rd edition, Dana Morgan and Robert Goldenkoff, Arco Publishing (2002)
- *Guide to Homeland Security Careers*, Donald B. Hutton and Anna Mydlarz, Barron's Educational Series (2003)

John Douglas's *Guide to Careers in the FBI*, John E. Douglas, Kaplan (1998)