Career Outlook

Working for the federal government: Part 1

Dennis Vilorio | September 2014

The U.S. government needs a lot of workers to provide its many services. Federal workers carry out key government functions. For example, federal workers ensure food safety, investigate criminal activity, provide emergency care, and develop science and technology. Their work affects millions of people.

As you might expect from an organization with so many important functions, the federal government offers a variety of careers. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), in May 2013, more than 2 million federal civilian workers were employed in 350 different occupations. Whatever your interests or skills, there is likely a federal job that suits you.

This article can help you decide whether federal work is for you. The first section answers some frequently asked questions about the U.S. government and its employment. The second section describes some of the rewards and challenges of government work. Resources for more information are at the end of the article.

This is the first of two articles on working for the federal government. The second article covers the application process.

Federal FAQs

Like many large organizations, the federal government needs employees with different types of skills working in many locations. This section answers some frequently asked questions about government work and workers—including what they do, where their jobs are, what kind of education they need to get started, and how much they earn.

What is the federal government?

The U.S. government oversees the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and U.S. territories. The federal government is divided into three branches: legislative, judicial, and executive. These three branches comprise departments and agencies that are responsible for specific government functions.

Legislative. The legislative branch makes laws and levies taxes to fund the federal government's services. This branch includes Congress, which consists of the Senate and the House of Representatives. It also includes agencies that support Congress, such as the Capitol Police, the Government Accountability Office, and the Library of Congress.

Judicial. The judicial branch interprets the meaning of laws and how they are applied. It is made up of the Supreme Court of the United States; lower courts, such as Courts of Appeals; special courts, including the Tax Court; and support organizations, such as the Federal Judiciary Center.

Executive. The executive branch enforces laws. This branch includes the President; the 15 executive departments, including the Departments of Defense, Labor, and State; and related agencies within the departments. It also includes independent agencies, such as the Environmental Protection Agency; boards and committees, such as the National Park Foundation; and quasi-official agencies, such as the Smithsonian Institution.

Most federal agencies are part of the executive branch. Examples of agencies in this branch are the Census Bureau (which is part of the Department of Commerce), the Federal Housing Administration (Department of Housing and Urban Development), and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Department of Health and Human Services).

Who works for the federal government?

According to data from the BLS Occupational Employment Statistics (OES) survey, the federal government employed just over 2 million civilian workers in May 2013. That's about 1.5 percent of the nearly 133 million workers BLS counted in all industries in the United States.

But total federal employment varies, depending on which workers are counted. For example, the OES total includes only federal executive branch workers. Data in this article are from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and include full-time, permanent, non-postal civilian workers from all branches, for a total of 1.8 million. (Federal contractors are not directly employed by the government and are not included in these totals.)

OPM data show that the federal workforce is diverse, and the demographics are similar to that of the overall labor force. In 2013, men slightly outnumbered women, for example. More than one-third of federal employees were minorities, with Blacks making up the largest portion (18 percent) of these minority workers. And nearly 9 percent of federal workers have a disability.

What do federal workers do?

Federal workers help the government operate and provide its services. OPM groups workers according to their tasks, such as administrative, professional, technical, and clerical. (See table 1.) These groups are based on OPM data categories, which are different from the BLS categories based on the Standard Occupational Classification system.

Table 1: Federal employment and median salary by occupational category, fiscal year 2013

Occupational category	Employment	Median salary
See footnotes at end of table.		
Administrative	724,633	$85,343
Professional	469,456	94,583

Table 1: Federal employment and median salary by occupational category, fiscal year 2013

Occupational category	Employment	Median salary
Technical	306,983	47,254
Blue collar	172,967	52,624
Clerical	86,138	37,724
Other white collar and unspecified	71,546	55,844*

* Median salary for other white-collar workers only; excludes unspecified workers. Source: U.S. Office of Personnel Management, Data Analysis Group

Administrative. According to OPM, nearly 40 percent of federal workers are in administrative occupations. These workers may handle payroll, train new employees, and develop standard operating procedures. This group includes human resources specialists, accountants, and logisticians.

Professional. Workers in professional occupations may analyze policy, develop budgets, and provide healthcare services. These occupations include lawyers, financial managers, and registered nurses.

Technical. These workers may design buildings, test consumer products, and control the spread of disease. Examples include chemists, mechanical engineers, and computer network administrators.

Blue collar. Blue-collar employees may maintain heating and cooling systems, clean offices, and construct buildings. Occupations include janitors, sheet metal workers, and painters.

Clerical. Workers in clerical occupations do office tasks such as data entry, filing documents, and answering the phone. Examples include information clerks, secretaries, and office clerks.

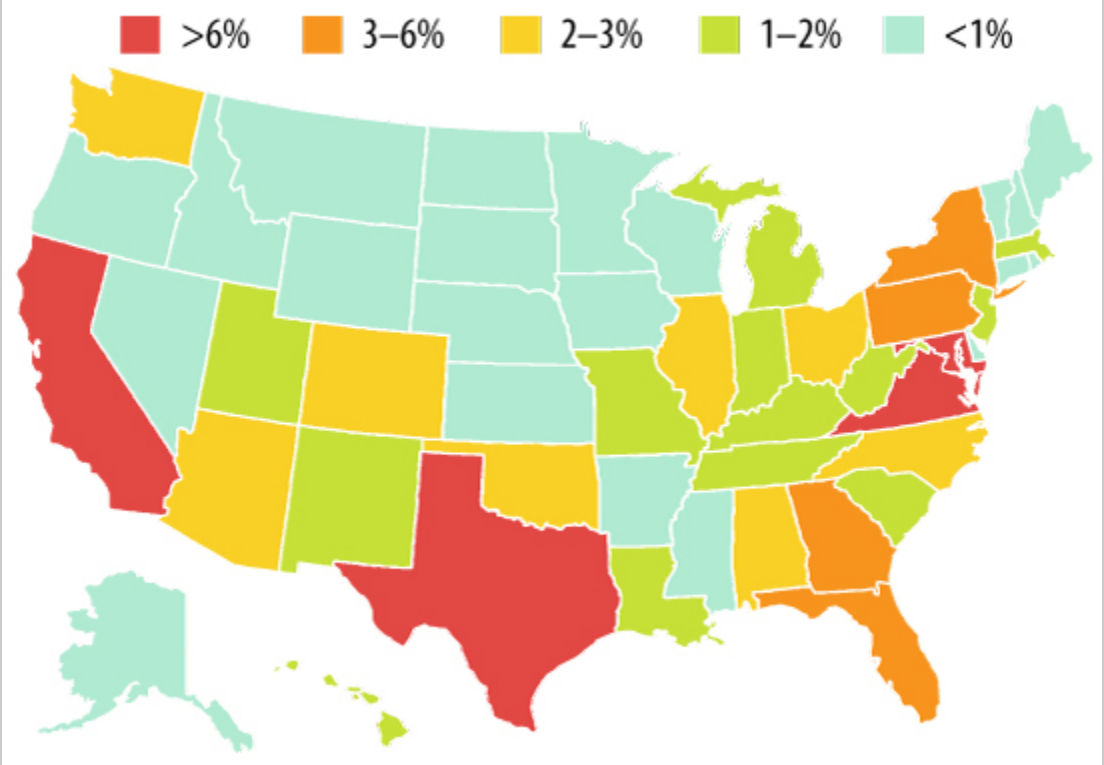
Other. Workers who have tasks that do not fit neatly with those in another group are in “other” occupations. These occupations include firefighters, detectives, and correctional officers.

Where do they work?

Most federal employees work in the executive branch. And almost all of them work in the United States. A small portion of federal workers serve abroad in government facilities, such as U.S. embassies and consulate offices.

Geographic location. According to OPM, in 2013, about 22 percent of federal employment was concentrated in Virginia, Maryland, and the District of Columbia, where many government agencies are located. But that means nearly 80 percent of the federal workforce was elsewhere, with employees in each state throughout the country. (See chart.) For example, California and Texas combined accounted for about 15 percent of federal workers.

Chart: Federal employment by state, fiscal year 2013



Note: Data are for non-seasonal full-time permanent employees who work 40 hours per week year round with no absolute end date.
Source: U.S. Office of Personnel Management, Data Analysis Group

Employment by agency. Agencies related to the armed services, such as those under the Departments of Veteran Affairs, account for more than half of federal civilian employment. The other half of employment is spread throughout the remaining agencies, including the Departments of Justice and Agriculture. (See table 2.)

Table 2: Federal employment by agency, fiscal year 2013

Federal agency	Employment	Percent of total employment
See footnotes at end of table.		
Department of Veterans Affairs	297,528	16.2%
Department of the Army	241,609	13.2
Department of the Navy	188,599	10.3
Department of Homeland Security	168,348	9.2
All other agencies	159,634	8.7
Department of the Air Force	159,499	8.7
Department of Justice	112,342	6.1
Department of the Treasury	89,852	4.9
Department of Defense	85,579	4.7

Table 2: Federal employment by agency, fiscal year 2013

Federal agency	Employment	Percent of total employment
Department of Agriculture	74,117	4.1
Department of Health and Human Services	62,086	3.4
Department of Transportation	54,374	3.0
Department of the Interior	50,959	2.8
Department of Commerce	34,550	1.9
Department of Labor	15,354	0.8
Department of Energy	14,739	0.8
Department of State	10,142	0.6
Department of Housing and Urban Development	8,547	0.5
Department of Education	3,865	0.2
Total	**1,831,723**	**100**

Note: Data are for non-seasonal full-time permanent employees who work 40 hours per week year round with no absolute end date. Source: U.S. Office of Personnel Management, Data Analysis Group

What education do they need?

The federal government hires workers with broad levels of education and experience. OPM establishes minimum qualifications by occupation or job. For example, workers in professional and technical occupations often need at least a bachelor's degree, and those in clerical occupations may qualify with a high school diploma.

The federal government uses a few different systems to classify jobs. For example, the Federal Wage System classifies jobs in trade, craft, and other blue-collar occupations. But the most common is the General Schedule (GS) system. Under this system, agencies assign each job a GS grade from 1 to 15 based on job duties and qualifications. When federal agencies refer to job classifications, they combine the "GS" classification with a hyphen and the grade level. For example, an economist job may be classified as "GS-9." Table 3 shows the typical education required and starting salary for major GS grades.

Table 3: Typical education required and starting salary, by selected GS level

GS level	Education level	Starting salary, 2014
See footnotes at end of table.		
GS-1	No high school diploma	$17,981
GS-3	High school diploma	22,058
GS-4	Associate's degree	24,763
GS-5	Bachelor's degree	27,705
GS-9	Master's degree	41,979
GS-11	Doctoral or professional degree	50,790

Source: U.S. Office of Personnel Management

Jobs at GS grades 1 through 4 are often internships or related to manual labor, and these typically require an associate's degree as the highest education level. Most entry-level jobs are GS grades 5 through 7 and typically require at least a bachelor's degree. Jobs at GS-13 or above may be supervisory or managerial positions.

Some jobs, such as editor, require a bachelor's degree but do not specify a field of study. Others, such as museum curators, require a degree in a specific major or designate a minimum number of credits in a particular subject area. And in some cases, having more education or experience than a position requires may qualify applicants for a higher GS grade—and higher pay.

How much do they earn?

In 2013, according to OPM, the average annual federal salary was just over $79,000.

Federal workers' wages or salaries are based on their job classification, grade level, geographic location, and length of employment. To help offset higher living costs, the federal government includes a premium, called locality pay, for employees who work in 34 urban areas. This premium provides a percentage-based increase over the base pay. For example, a GS-7 job pays nearly $3,000 more in Boston, Massachusetts, than it does in Decatur, Alabama.

Workers typically are eligible for "step increases" every 1 to 3 years, until they reach the maximum step in the grade for their job. There are 10 steps at each grade level. Step increases are accompanied by a small bump in pay.

Along with salaries or wages, employee compensation in the federal government include benefits, such as subsidized health insurance.

Rewards and challenges

Federal workers choose government employment for many reasons; some of these are job security and the opportunity to serve the public. But, like any job, federal work has rewards and challenges.

Rewards

One of the biggest draws of federal work is the chance to make a positive difference, which workers say is a source of pride. Satisfaction often comes from knowing that they are helping and serving people in their roles as public employees.

Another appeal to working for the government is job security. Many federal services—including national security, emergency response, and air traffic control—are essential and ongoing. For this reason, federal workers may feel they have greater job stability than private-sector employees.

The federal government also offers benefits such as low-cost life insurance and paid vacation and sick leave that begin accruing on the first day of work. Some agencies allow flexible work arrangements, such as alternative schedules. And, when funding is available, agencies may pay for workers to get additional education, such as a professional certificate or graduate degree.

Challenges

For many workers, the biggest challenge of federal work is its bureaucracy: the sheer size of the federal government makes it difficult for agencies to act independently.

The vastness of the government contributes to another commonly cited challenge: the complexity of the hiring process. Some people find the job descriptions and application procedures confusing, for example. And workers with technical skills often feel their career options are limited.

Similar to many other organizations, federal agencies don't control their own budgets. Spending is set by the President and Congress for the government as a whole. Uncertain budgeting makes long-term planning difficult and may negatively affect worker morale. An agency's ability to maintain or improve their operations, such as through updating equipment and supporting innovation, depends on the funding it receives.

Despite the challenges, some federal workers feel the rewards of working for the public are worth whatever sacrifices they make to forego the private sector. Are you ready to join the federal workforce? Check *Career Outlook* in November for tips on how to get a federal job.

For more information

The federal government has workers in about 350 different occupations, according to BLS. For detailed information about those and more occupations, see the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* (*OOH*). Each *OOH* profile includes information about job duties, employment, wages, qualifications, and job outlook.

To learn more about working for the federal government, visit the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) online. OPM provides government-employment information, such as hiring practices, data, and employee benefits and wages.

Visit Go Government for information on a variety of topics related to federal employment, such as application tips and the pros and cons of government work.

Best Places to Work scores and ranks each federal agency. You can compare up to three agencies in a number of categories, including leadership, worklife balance, and employee demographics.

"Working for the federal government: Part 2," scheduled for November publication in *Career Outlook*, explains the federal hiring process. In the meantime, visit USAJOBS to find and apply for federal jobs.

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