



CHAPTER ONE

Introduction to Federal Career Development

Do you dream of a better life, higher pay, a challenging position with responsibility and one that takes full advantage of your interests, education, and experience? You can turn your dreams into reality and be one of the many thousands of federal employees each year that are promoted or attain higher level government jobs.

*The average
annual salary
now exceeds
\$79,186.*

What separates those who want to improve and progress in their careers from those who actually achieve success? The fact is that it's not enough to dream about promotions, great new jobs, and higher pay, you have to plan a course of action to achieve those goals. The factors that will determine whether or not you succeed are motivation, personal initiative, and taking the steps (ACTIONS) necessary to make your dreams come true.

If you're not satisfied with your current job or if you've been bypassed for a promotion don't despair, help is out there if you know where to look. You have many options and career paths to pursue in the federal sector. Even if you lack the required education or experience there are ways to obtain skills needed to reach your career goals.

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

- ✎ Understanding upward mobility
- ✎ Government changes that support your goals
- ✎ The Keys to success
- ✎ Federal career development programs
- ✎ How to get started

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Take Charge of Your Federal Career is a practical, action-oriented career management workbook for federal employees. Packed with proven tips and valuable assessment and evaluation tools. This unique workbook provides federal workers with the individualized know-how and guidance they need to identify, obtain, and successfully demonstrate the skills and experience required to qualify for new and better federal jobs.

You'll learn how to prepare an Individual Development Plan (IDP) that includes self assessment, locating job opportunities and career enhancement details and assignments, setting realistic goals, networking techniques, how to complete a dynamite application, interviewing techniques, and how to stay on track. You'll discover exceptional resources to locate job vacancy announcements, agency web sites, employment applications, forms and procedures, new federal department connections, how to enhance interviewing skills, and much more. This new workbook provides abundant resources to develop your career goals and locate government jobs.

Upward Mobility

The potential for upward mobility in the federal sector is excellent for those who know how to aggressively pursue their career goals. Federal employees that take the personal initiative to plan their future have a better than average chance to succeed and be promoted. Uncle Sam is this country's largest employer and hires about 2 % of the total civilian workforce and the federal sector is growing at its fastest pace in decades. Over the past two years total federal civil service has increased 10%, an additional 182,629 jobs. The diversity of work and the ability to transfer to other agencies and locations further improves your chances. There are so many options available that you can easily get off track if you don't focus your efforts on realistic targets of opportunity.

Most federal agencies encourage employees to develop their careers through (IDPs) Individual Development Plans. However, it's the employee's responsibility to initiate the process and to develop personalized and realistic plans to achieve their short and long term career goals. All agencies provide training to improve your skills for the position you now occupy. However, they don't automatically provide training that is outside the duties and responsibilities for your current Position Description unless you develop an IDP.

All agencies offer career development plans and all plans are fashioned after the process outlined in this workbook. They may have a different name, however they all originate from the same federal regulations that require agencies to provide career development programs to interested employees.

The opportunities are almost limitless by comparison when you consider the numbers. Approximately 50% of the workforce is eligible for retirement and with the growth in government employment, many more opportunities exist.



The Changing Government

There is one thing certain in life and government, things change and change dramatically at times. Outsourcing was the catch phrase of the day in government until recently. The new administration initiated an aggressive in-sourcing program to eliminate contractor positions and replacing them with full time permanent federal employees. The DOD recently announced the hiring of an additional 20,000 employees to replace contractor positions and other agencies are following suit.

The federal sector is expanding at an unprecedented pace since the attacks on 9/11/2001 and most recently with the implementation of national health care and bank rescue programs. Homeland Security was formed after 9/11 and the Transportation Security Agency (TSA) now employs 50,000 security officers, inspectors, directors, air marshals and managers. The new health care legislation calls for the formation of 150 new regulatory agencies and commissions, and the financial sector needs many new regulatory personnel to manage failed banks and the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) funds allocated to rescue our financial system.

The federal government now owns 60% of General Motors, all of Fanny Mae and Freddie Mac plus they took over 100% of the student loan program recently! Talk about **GROWTH**. Finally, the Department of Defense recently announced the phasing out of their National Security Personnel System (NSPS), their employee rating system, and will return workers to the General Schedule system shortly.

Other significant changes include attractive incentives for federal employees and new hires. Agencies can now pay up to \$60,000 towards your student loans at \$10,000 a year for up to six years. There are generous relocation allowances available, and you can negotiate starting salary in some cases.

Applying for jobs has become much easier and most new hires apply online through OPM's or individual agency websites. Merit promotion applicants can still submit hard copies of standard OF-612 forms or a federal style resume in most cases and the vast majority of entrance exams have been replaced with "Occupational Questionnaires" and self certification processes.

The Keys to Success

There are a number of steps that you must take to develop a viable career development program. Without proper planning you may not succeed and a structured program will improve your chance of success considerably. These seven essential steps will get you where you want to go:

1. Self Assessment
2. Locating Job Opportunities (Targeting Positions)
3. Setting Realistic Goals (IDPs) Individual Development Plans
4. Completing Your Application
5. Networking (Self Promotion and Discovery)
6. Interview Preparation
7. Follow-up (Staying on Track)

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Each of these steps is important and one without the other often leads to failure and confusion. Each step builds on the other and is discussed in detail in a related chapter of this guide. If you take one step at a time and build on each step as you develop it, you will make a connection.

Self Assessment

I believe in a practical approach to self assessment. There are many instruments available to evaluate your interests, likes, and dislikes but few if any tools are tailored specifically to the federal employee. Yes, federal employees are unique in many ways. We work for the largest single employer in the country, have over 900 occupational titles to explore, employment opportunities worldwide, and unlike the private sector we have detailed classification standards, (MPP) Merit Promotion Plan Announcements, and Position Descriptions at our disposal to help us focus on the specific jobs we seek. Visit www.fedcareer.info for online links to these valuable documents. The assessment process featured in this book will utilize the tools that are readily available to all federal employees and culminate in the development of a comprehensive IDP plan.

The assessment is the critical first step of the process that will help you take charge of your federal career. After completing the assessment you will have the information you need to complete the puzzle. It's like having all of the pieces in a box and then you start assembling the data (puzzle pieces) into an order that will make sense to YOU.

Locating Job Opportunities (Targeting Positions)

Here is where the puzzle really starts coming together. You'll begin to match your skills, education, work experiences, and interests to specific job series. Say your current job series is GS-342-9. You may look within the same group such as the GS-300 General Administrative, Clerical, and Office Services Group or your assessment may take you to an entirely different group or family such as the GS-500 Accounting and Budget Group. This will again be done with tools that are readily available. You will evaluate MPP announcements that interest you, explore the associated Classification Standards, and review current position descriptions to match your assessment results with that occupation. None of this process is going to be left to your imagination. The process will use what's available to you **NOW** including resources in this book; a comprehensive Skills Index, Occupational Profiles that are available on-line, and the Appendixes which provide a career path conversion chart for your use.

Your IDP - Individual Development Plan

The IDP is what pulls it all together. You will use the assessments in this book and target positions to establish realistic career goals that match your interests, desires, knowledge and abilities. IDPs are tailored to your special needs and circumstances. They can help you improve your current job performance, focus on career development for your future career goals, and they can be used to enhance personal development.

An IDP is a written plan designed by the employee with their supervisor's input to meet his/her career goals. They provide a vehicle for employees to identify and plan developmental training and to gain work related experience for the IDP's targeted positions. Their primary purpose is to assist employees to accomplish achievable goals, assess their particular strengths and weaknesses, and evaluate plan progress.

IDPs are used to develop both short term and long term career goals. There are many options available to pursue your goals such as developmental assignments, specific work tasks, correspondence courses, lateral assignments and details, temporary promotions, and formal training if available. It's also important to develop alternative plans. A signed IDP doesn't guarantee that an agency will be able to fund your plan. If funds aren't available for formal training or to fund a lateral detail be prepared with alternative strategies such as correspondence courses or local mentoring.

You aren't in this alone. Your supervisor is there to assist and help you develop realistic and achievable goals that will support the agency's strategic plans. Supervisors can also approve training and developmental assignments. Once you notify your supervisor that you want to develop an IDP he too will prepare for your first meeting by reviewing your current job standards and position description. He must also look at the organization's long term needs and consider proposed changes and demographics. Supervisors are there to assist the employee to develop both short and long term goals and to provide available resources that will help you gain the required knowledge, skills, and abilities.

Completing Your Application

This essential step provides others with their first impression of you and your intent. First impressions can be lasting so your application must stand out from the crowd. There are a number of ways to achieve this. First, applications and cover letters must be neatly typed preferably on a word processor and well organized. All applications, whether a federal style resume or fill in the blank application form such as the OF-612, must be tailored to the position you are applying for. It is a waste of time to simply send the same application for all job vacancies. You need to highlight your strengths and KSAs for each job announcement.

Your application's content is critical. If you neglect to mention key work related experiences and acquired training, that is required for that position, you will either be rate ineligible or rate at a lower grade than you would otherwise qualify for. The more effort you put into this process the better off you will be. Chapter 9 provides an overview of the process, resources that will help you complete a professional application, and direct you to professional services if needed.

Another factor is the use of key words and phrases. Automated application review software and classification specialists search for key words and phrases. When they find them in your work descriptions you earn additional points and a higher rating. It's important to realize that every agency has their own catch words, phrases, acronyms, and attention grabbers.

Networking and the Informational Interview

Networking and informational interviews will help you with several phases of your career exploration program. Early on when you are exploring options and locating target positions they will give you insight into varied career paths. Notes are an important part of this effort and they can take many forms, from simple written outlines and bullets to recorded tapes. Many people simply don't like to write or take notes. If you fit that description, record summaries of your discussions after the meeting or phone conversation and play the notes back and write down the key facts that you want to retain.

The federal workforce talks the jargon (agency slang) and they use acronyms like they are going out of style. Your notes will capture key words and phrases that you may want to incorporate into your application package. Don't hesitate to ask for clarifications when talking with other federal workers. If they are talking about the NSPS initiatives and you don't know what NSPS stands for, ask. It can mean a number of things depending on the agency. To many NSPS means the "National Security Personnel System" to others it may mean "National Society of Professional Surveyors." Every contact you make is a potential gold mine of information that can be used to your benefit.

This guide's networking section outlines the processes for you, provides templates to follow, and lists numerous resources to help you make a connection. Networking has mostly been associated with the private sector but it has always been a factor in the federal sector as well. Those who master these techniques can expand their opportunities far beyond what they imagined. Early in my federal career I used networking, it wasn't called that back then, to explore a number of related government occupations. Within two years of beginning my search I landed a better job in a desirable occupation that eventually led to a top management position. On another occasion I and a number of fellow federal workers organized a local Toastmasters club. One of our new members was a former engineer with the Corp. of Engineers. Through her affiliation with our group she discovered that we had a job vacancy in her specialty and she landed the job. Twenty years later she was at the top of her field and a GS-15 manager of a large organization.

Follow up (Staying on Track)

This is the one step that is often ignored and yet has a tremendous impact on whether or not you succeed. By the time you work through your career development plan, complete your applications, and initiated several contacts many let it go at that. They begin their initial developmental assignments or training and after awhile things calm down, initiative wanes, and before you know it two years have gone by and you're still in the same job! This is typical without follow-up, established deadlines and action items to keep you on track. It isn't enough to get started. You and your supervisor must keep the momentum going. A plan without established review dates is often worthless. Set realistic target completion dates, review your IDP with your supervisor regularly, and keep your plan up-to-date. Life is constant change and you must be prepared for those changes to succeed.

When you review your IDP with your supervisor come prepared to update your plan. New training opportunities and developmental programs may now be available. Look for out-of-agency training programs that are scheduled for your location and don't forget about agency training programs and seminars. It's up to you to be proactive in your career development program. Your supervisor can help with resources and counseling however you are primarily responsible for working through the plan. Think of your supervisor as a catalyst that can help you make it happen. She can request funds for your training, arrange for details and allow you time to participate in other activities such as mentoring or (OJT) On the Job Training assignments.

Federal Career Development (Training) Laws

Public Law 85-507, The Government Employees Training Act, is outlined in Title 5, Chapter 41, of the United States Code. It provides the authority to most federal agencies to train employees. In 1967 through executive Order 11348 this law was amended and states that it is the policy of the United States "to develop its employees through the establishment and operation of progressive and efficient training programs, thereby improving public service, increasing efficiency and economy, building and retaining a work force of skilled and efficient employees, and installing and using the best modern practices and techniques in the conduct of the government's business."

These laws require agencies and departments to periodically review their developmental and training needs required to meet their objectives and to improve agency performance. The most efficient means of training is desired and this can include interagency options, other government agencies, or private sector vendors.

New training and developmental initiatives are created and fielded each year. Most agencies have comprehensive internal career development initiatives that are in compliance with these laws. This has permitted agencies to develop programs that are tailored to their specific organizational and employee needs.

This non-standardization is why you see different terms and names for essentially the same career development program that we describe in this workbook. If your terms, forms, or process is a little different, that doesn't change the intent, purpose and usefulness of the stated process. Tailor your plan to your agencies unique needs or requirements and start the process.

Summary

All supervisors want proficient and well trained employees. They have a vested interest in your career development and fortunately today there are programs available to cover just about any employee's desired training path. Many agencies will pay for evening college tuition if funding is available, as long as you maintain a C or better grade point average and if the course is either work related or listed on your written IDP plan. There are hundreds of worthwhile government correspondence courses, OJT assignments, lateral details, temporary promotional

opportunities, online degree and certificate programs, and upward mobility programs for all levels and pay grades.

If you find an interesting online course check it out to make sure it is accredited. Go to www.fedcareer.info to read more about accreditation and to explore a laundry list of accredited courses that may be suitable for your goals.

The long and short of it is that if you want to grow in your career Uncle Sam is standing by with resources to help you succeed. To keep you on track use the Career Transition Checklist in Appendix A. Each of the following chapters build on the other.

Workable plans take quality time to develop. Don't rush the process and take one step at a time. When you finish this workbook you will have completed all of the necessary steps that you will personally need to complete a viable Individual Development Plan. Get started today with the Self Assessment in Chapter Two.

Make this a work in progress and take notes in the margins, fill in the draft forms included in each chapter and use the designated "Notes," areas to write down contact names, numbers, thoughts and ideas. Don't worry about using the forms, we have **FREE** downloadable forms posted online at www.fedcareer.info for you to use for your finished product. I also suggest picking up a copy of *The Book of U.S. Government Jobs* - 10th edition and visit this book's companion website at www.federaljobs.net. The 10th edition compliments your plan by providing a comprehensive guide for completing a professional federal application and resume. You will learn how to tailor your application to the job announcement and there are numerous professional resume examples for multiple disciplines. KSA and ECQ samples are also presented with suggested formatting techniques.



Helpful Web Sites

www.fedcareer.info

www.federaljobs.net

www.searchfedjobs.com

www.usajobs.gov

www.ehsjobs.org

Retirement Planning Sites

www.federalretirement.net

www.fedretire.net
