GETTING A CIVIL SERVICE JOB
by Mark Rowh

How would you like to work for one of the world's largest employers while earning good pay and great benefits? Sound good? Work for the government!

About one in every six adults in the United States is a government employee. The federal government, the 50 states, and numerous cities and counties all hire large numbers of people to provide many services, ranging from national defense to providing social and educational services.

The Fed alone employs nearly 3 million workers, notes Dennis Damp in THE BOOK OF U.S. GOVERNMENT JOBS. This includes the hiring of about 350,000 new employees each year to replace those who retire or leave for other reasons. The result: Opportunities are good for new workers.

Many of these jobs are known as civil service positions. That means they are civilian jobs to which people are appointed rather than elected. For the most part, they are based on merit, that is, on the qualifications of those who apply.

ADVANTAGES OF CIVIL SERVICE

As with other occupational areas, government careers have their good and bad points. Most offer reasonably good salaries and attractive benefits such as liberal holiday and vacation schedules, educational assistance, and health insurance.

Another advantage of government jobs is stability. Government positions tend to be less vulnerable to economic change than private sector jobs. In a private company you might suddenly find that your employer has gone out of business or has been bought out by another firm.

Another plus is job mobility. Because many skills are common to different units of government, it's possible to move from one agency to another if you want a change in geography or simply a more challenging position. An accountant who works for a federal agency, for example, can readily apply job skills to another agency, or to a state or local governmental unit.

Equal opportunity is a key facet of government employment. Government agencies emphasize merit and credentials rather than personal contacts or favoritism when hiring, so opportunities for women and minorities are often greater with government agencies than with private employers.

The major disadvantage of government jobs is lower pay than corresponding jobs in the private sector. This may be partially offset by good fringe benefits and working conditions (see "Government Dollars").

OK, you want a civil service job. Here are four steps to follow for success in landing one:

1. Identify job openings. The civil service system is set up to give all citizens a fair opportunity to seek jobs they are qualified for. The saying, "It's not what you know, but whom you know" does not apply. Government agencies announce job openings so that anyone who is interested may apply.

So where do you find out what jobs are available? Perhaps the best place to start is the U.S. Office of Personnel Management. You can obtain job information at any time, day or night, through its automated telephone system (912-757-3800). Or if you have a computer with a modem, dial (912) 757-3100.

Another place to find out about these openings is the classified section of newspapers. Many government agencies list job vacancies in the want ads. They also post announcements on bulletin boards, send notices to employment and college placement offices, and mail them to people who request them.

If you have access to that vast network of computerized information known as the Internet, you can use it to identify government job openings. To reach the Office of Personnel Management, use FJOB.MAIL.OPM.GOV. Or look up "government jobs" with an Internet search program. Your computer will then provide details on available jobs (including listings of state-level jobs as well as federal positions).

2. Take qualifying exams. One way to compete for a civil service job is to take a special examination. This is not as common as it once was, since in 1995 the government eliminated the need to take the ACWA (Administrative Careers With America) test. This exam had previously been required for applicants seeking many white-collar government jobs. Instead of taking this test, job candidates may now demonstrate qualifications by listing a college degree or previous work experience.

Exams are still required for some jobs. The U.S. Postal Service, for instance, administers exams for postal workers. Other agencies may require proficiency exams on topics such as word processing, air traffic control, or other specialized areas.

How do you know if a qualifying exam applies to a particular type of government job? The best way is to identify a general career area or specific job opening, and then review the listed qualifications. Such details will be included in any written job announcement. You also can contact an employment service agency or any potential government employer and ask about required exams.

3. Fill out applications or provide resumes. Once you identify a potential job, you will need to fill out an application form or provide similar information. Until recently, a complex form was required for many federal government jobs, but this has been changed. You now can use a standard form, the "Optional Application for Federal Employment," to provide details about your educational background, work experience, and other relevant facts.

As an alternative, you can submit a resume of your qualifications. This has the advantage of giving you flexibility in organizing and listing details in the most flattering way possible. If you choose this option, be sure to develop a resume that includes as much detail as other applicants will be providing on the standard application form (it may need to be longer than traditional one- or two-page resumes). To be sure you are not too brief, obtain a blank copy of the optional application form and use it as a guide for information to include in your resume.

4. Polish your interview skills. If you are being considered for a job, chances are you will have at least one interview. You'll want to present yourself in the best possible light. This means speaking clearly, dressing neatly, and being prepared to demonstrate your value as a potential employee.
To make sure your interview is a success, do your homework. Take time to practice interviews with a friend or teacher. Read about the agency before going for an interview so you can ask intelligent questions. Arrive early so you do not appear rushed.

If you're considering a government career, keep in mind that the real name of the game is credentials. The better your credentials (diplomas, certifications, degrees, and other ways of showing tangible qualifications), the greater your chances of landing a civil service position. So, do everything possible to build outstanding qualifications, and then use them to win an interview and then to make a case that you are the right choice for the job.

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GOVERNMENT DOLLARS

How much can you earn as a government employee? If you work in state government, amounts may vary widely from one state to another. For federal employees, many salaries follow a general schedule (GS) in which different jobs are divided into 15 basic grades. Within each grade, salaries include 10 steps, each higher than the previous one. Here are some representative figures. Keep in mind that beginning salaries are at the lower end of the scale; the highest salaries tend to require many years of experience.

Grade: GS 1 Step 1: $12,595 Step 5: $14,272 Step 10: $15,754
Grade: GS 5 Step 1: $19,407 Step 5: $21,996 Step 10: $25,233
Grade: GS 10 Step 1: $32,382 Step 5: $36,702 Step 10: $42,102
Grade: GS 15 Step 1: $70,482 Step 5: $79,881 Step 10: $91,629

These salaries do not apply to all federal employees (for example, postal service employees follow a different schedule).

Citations

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