

Maxwell School Center for CAREER DEVELOPMENT

YOUR GUIDE TO THE UNITED STATES FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AND CAPITOL HILL

OVERVIEW

The US Federal Government is the largest employer in the United States.

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.

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 OPPORTUNITIES

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.

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. 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.

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.

TYPES OF JOBS

There are two main types of jobs to consider:

- Foreign service
- Civil service

QUALIFICATIONS + SKILLS

- Superior written and oral communication skills
- Excellent research and data analysis skills
- Demonstrated leadership
- Ability to work in a team environment
- Strong work ethic and dedication

YOUR GUIDE TO CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

SAMPLE EMPLOYERS

- Department of Agriculture
- Department of Commerce
- Department of Defense
- Department of Energy
- Department of Health and Human Services
- Department of Housing and Urban Development
- Department of the Interior
- Department of Justice
- Department of Labor
- Department of State
- Department of Transportation
- Department of the Treasury
- Congressional Budget Office
- Congressional Research Service
- Environmental Protection Agency
- Central Intelligence Agency
- General Accounting Office
- National Security Council
- Office of Management and Budget
- US Trade Representative
- Federal Reserve System

SAMPLE MAXWELL CLASSES

- Policy Budgeting
- Urban Policy
- Managing Individual, Group & Systemic Conflicts
- Education Policy
- Public Administration and Law
- Tax Politics & Policy
- Health Economics & Policy
- Digital Government
- Social Media in the Public Sector
- Regulatory Law and Policy
- Ethics and Public Policy

RESOURCES

- [AvueCentral](#)
- [FederalGovernmentJobs.us](#)
- [FedWorld.gov](#)
- [Making the Difference](#)
- [Partnership for Public Service](#)
- [USA JOBS](#)
- [StudentJobs.gov](#)

RELATED CAREER GUIDES

- [Foreign Service](#)
- [State and Local Government](#)
- [Government Relations and Lobbying](#)

PRO TIP: The tried and true method for securing government positions is networking. 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). 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.