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How to Land a Top-Paying Federal Job
*Your Complete Guide to Opportunities, Internships, Resumes and Cover Letters,
Application Essays (KSAs), Interviews, Salaries, Promotions, and More!*
By
Lily Whiteman

Whiteman writes an incredibly detailed treatise for people looking for their first federal job as well as for current government employees (feds) looking for promotions or different jobs. She begins by debunking 18 “myths” about federal employment. For example, it is not true that federal salaries are non-negotiable or that feds are all lazy and dim-witted. Nor is it true that work schedules are rigid or that all feds ascend the career ladder at the same pace.

If you thought most feds were unhappy, Whiteman quotes a study saying that 75% of feds are happy. 71% in the private sector are also happy.

Because an “unprecedented retirement tsunami” is expected in the next 10 years, many more federal jobs than normal will be available. 60 percent of current feds (90 percent of senior managers) are eligible to retire. At least 40 percent (approximately 200,000) are expected to retire. While many of the top jobs will be filled by promoting current feds, there will be multiple opportunities for other promotions and also opportunities to apply from the outside at various levels, i.e., a trickle down effect.

Whiteman’s list of places to find these opportunities includes:

- ◆ Agency websites
- ◆ USAJOBS (<http://usajobs.org>) (It lists more than 15,000 jobs all over the world, is updated daily, and is organized to search by keywords.)
- ◆ Job fairs
- ◆ Congressional employment offices, their websites, and publications about Capitol Hill for legislative jobs¹
- ◆ The Plum Book for a list of all political appointments²

¹ There are a few pages about the differences between Hill jobs and agency jobs (e.g., no job security on the Hill and longer hours expected) and about potential paths to these 24,000 jobs (e.g., be a campaigner, unpaid internships, work on specific issues).

² The White House makes these appointments, and Whiteman only recommends exploiting whatever connections you may have with the White House to land one of these 7,000 jobs.

Other ideas to find jobs include:

- ◆ Internships, fellowships
- ◆ Joining professional organizations
- ◆ Volunteering
- ◆ Expanding your network by serving on taskforces or committees that give you experience on issues and introduce you to people who may help you

For the non-fed, Whiteman explains vacancy announcements and outlines the hoops that an application goes through before an applicant is interviewed. There is the basic qualification cut, panel screening, rating and ranking, certification, and final cut. Her general advice is to “think like a hiring manager.” Applications need to be eye-catching, polished and error-free. They need to be able to be understood by non-specialists. You need to show enthusiasm for the position, while proving you are a “zero-risk.” She warns against mass mailings. Every application needs to be tailored to the target job.

Selling Yourself – Seven Steps

Step 1 Collect all documents.

Include the job announcement, prior resume, evaluations, letters or e-mails of commendation, speeches, publications, etc. Students need transcripts with GPA, papers, honors, list of jobs, activities, etc.

Step 2 Brainstorm your achievements.

Ask a friend to describe your accomplishments or pretend you are asking for a promotion. This exercise is easy if you follow her suggestion to keep a running record of projects, appointments, committees on which you serve, honors, commendations, etc.

A table on page 73 gives good examples of general descriptions of projects that “fizzle” vs. specific descriptions that “sizzle.”

Step 3 Quantify your achievements

Numbers are important and being as specific as possible helps make your case for being the best qualified applicant. Types of numbers to include:

Time, as in years, productivity, or time-saving.

People, as in those supervised or trained, attendees, stakeholders

Money, as in budget size, revenue, contracts, cost-saving, sales

Geography, as in square feet of space, facilities, states, countries

Other, as in suggestions, regulations implemented, size of database

A table on page 78 shows general descriptions of numbers that “fizzle” vs. specific descriptions that “sizzle.”

Step 4 Name Drop, Title Drop

Cite the highest level of associations and also the highest profile projects on which you have worked and your most widely distributed work product.

Step 5 Validate your success

Validation comes from formal evaluations, but also from letters of commendation, bonuses, as well as accomplishments such as grants received, patents, publications, etc. If your projects are used as models, if you are consulted as an expert or quoted, that is extra validation.

Step 6 Add power words and phrases.

Fit in power words to convey your value, e.g. “high-energy,” “high-volume,” “precedent-setting,” “on time and within budget,” “I created from scratch.”

Step 7 Match your skills and achievements to the target job

Tailor your work experience and skills to the target job. Repeating key words and phrases is not plagiarism.

Federal Resumes

Whiteman emphasizes writing clearly and formatting to highlight items to your best advantage. For example, bullets allow you to save space, and also allow the hiring manager to more easily skim through your resume. She says you just want to include “the needle, not the haystack.”

Another way to make your resume stand out is to not use “wimpy words” such as “to help,” or “to participate,” or words you would not use in conversation, e.g., “the aforementioned.” She recommends leading with your best shot, using active voice rather than passive, and telling a compelling story. You need to “infuse essays with life!” Don’t talk about routine matters at all, just the most powerful examples of your saving your little corner of the world (without the over use of “I, me, mine,” etc.) She says powerful stories have these elements: concrete problem or goal, action, challenges conquered, and positive results.

To allow for multiple proof readings, space out the time you work on your resume. It must be totally free of errors—both substantively and typographically. This means not waiting until the last minute to start.

Whiteman highly recommends a cover letter which “concisely summarizes your relevant credentials with bullets. After you research the target agency, you will be able to stress what you have to “offer” or “contribute” to the target job.

Interviews

Research the agency and google people you think you will be interviewing. There are common questions that you should prepare for. (See CD.) The answer to the common question “why should we hire you” needs to emphasize what you can do for the agency. You must convince them that you will solve problems, not create them. Some great examples of previous accomplishments can show them that you can do the job, but beyond that, you must impress them as being a team player and that you want to work there.

The opposite question “why shouldn’t we hire you” is tricky. You do not want to incriminate yourself. Any mistake you want to talk about should be a long time ago and you should show how you learned from the mistake. Whiteman says you should never criticize your boss or colleagues. After the interview, always send thank you cards or e-mails and be sure to notify references and prepare them if necessary.

After the job offer

Salaries are less and less set in stone, as more agencies look for flexibility to attract top talent. For example, some agencies have pay bands or may pay special rates for high demand professionals. The question of salary is put to the selecting official after you receive a formal offer. Having a competing offer at a higher salary puts you in the best position.

There is a small section on responding to a rejection that includes some wonderful quotes:

“Success is the ability to go from failure to failure without losing your enthusiasm.” --Winston Churchill

“And this, too, shall pass.” --Unknown³

“No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.” --Eleanor Roosevelt

³ I grew up thinking this was an original saying by my Great Aunt Clara (1884 – 1984) because she said it so often.

Whiteman also notes that the Beatle' first record was rejected – as was the book, Chicken Soup for the Soul, and the TV series, Desperate Housewives. She also says you never know what odd things a decision is based upon. You may want to consider asking the deciding official for pointers on improving your resume or interviewing techniques.

Advancing

In the last section, Whiteman makes recommendations for current feds to advance quickly. She starts with a great quote from almost 2,000 years ago, “Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity.” --Seneca (5 BC – 65 AD) Most of her suggestions are common sense, e.g., be enthusiastic and positive, don't watch the clock, be a problem solver, never say “that's not my job.” She groups a long list of ideas into four categories: Close the communication gap, get juicy projects, grow your reputation, and join professional organizations. She also suggests getting as much education and training as possible and looking for detail appointments to other agencies that may broaden your horizons.

Conclusion

Whiteman's book is a well-organized, thorough “how to” guide that will benefit both those first seeking federal jobs and current government workers. It takes some of the mystery out of the selection process and sets high standards for applications and preparation for interviews. The accompanying CD has numerous “cheat sheets” to help organize your preparation as well as templates for resumes.

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