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ABSTRACT

This paper compares searching for a Federal Job to taking up a new sport. Becoming good at a sport takes lessons and coaching, study of the rules, practice, investment in equipment and special clothes, time to play, scheduling, and ongoing interest with friend who enjoy the same sport. An Expert Player/Jobseeker in the Federal Job Search System takes all of the above--research, study, practice or writing, investment in time and play/applications, scheduling, and ongoing follow-up with the players--the Human Resources professionals and networking with government workers and supervisors. It takes perseverance, drive, resourcefulness and determination. The author highlights how he helps his clients who are unemployed prepare for searching for a Federal job. (GCP)

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*Looking for a New Sport That Pays Well?
Consider the Game of Federal Job Search*

by
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Looking for a New Sport that Pays Well? Consider the Game of Federal Job Search

Kathryn Kraemer Troutman

Searching for a Federal Job is like taking up a new sport. Becoming good at a sport takes lessons and coaching, study of the rules, practice, investment in equipment and special clothes, time to play, scheduling, and ongoing interest with friends who enjoy the same sport. An Expert Player / Jobseeker in the Federal Job Search System takes all of the above – research, study, practice or writing, investment in time and play/applications, scheduling, and ongoing follow-up with the players – the Human Resources professionals and networking with government workers and supervisors. It takes perseverance, drive, resourcefulness and determination – just like becoming expert in a sport!

This Federal Job Search Game will follow the *Ten Steps to a Federal Job* text “rule book” for successfully applying for federal jobs. Retired Ambassador Alvin Adams writes, “What work can be more important at this time of crisis and national need than a career in Federal Service? ... The process of applying for a job in the Federal government these days is complex – more than it should be. To compete successfully, you need the time, energy, and know-how to write the correct résumé and to apply in the right way for the right job for you.”

I tell my clients who are unemployed, almost unemployed or are unhappy in their current job, that searching for a Federal job takes a decision and commitment – just like taking up racquetball, sailing, golf, mountain biking, kayaking, or any other serious sport. The good thing about the time and investment they put into their game of Federal Job Search is that it could pay off with a steady, meaningful career position with good pay, regular promotions (4.1% this year), steady benefits including 401K, great days off, and health insurance.

But like any game you learn, it takes time to gain the skills, learn the rules and practice the sport. With Federal Job Search, the first thing you have to do is **learn the basics** (Step 2, Review the Federal Job Process) That means learning about the **agencies and departments in the Federal government**. What do these departments and agencies do? What are their missions? What jobs exist in these agencies? How could you fit into

the organization? This is where your game strategy begins: visualizing yourself in a the government providing services to a certain customer base (a segment of the American public).

For instance, the newest agency, which is hiring new people extensively, is the Department of Homeland Security. The new DHS has an exciting, valuable mission for all of us: to protect our homeland! They have combined parts of 22 agencies, including the entire Immigration & Naturalization Service, which is now called the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services (<http://www.immigration.gov/graphics/workfor/index.htm>). The BCIS is hiring many people on the U.S. borders to improve control of immigration and citizenship.

Some of these jobs do not require a particular college degree or experience! So a person who has not graduated college, or who has a college degree that is not in "citizenship," can apply for these jobs. The skills needed in these jobs include: communicating with the public, taking applications, interpreting laws for customers, working under pressure, solving problems, using computer skills. People with these skills can come from all types of private industry jobs! Titles of these jobs are: Applications Clerk (OA), Asylum Clerk (Office Automation), Contact Representative, IT Specialist, District Adjudications Officer, and many other job titles that are new to people in private industry. You can find more job listings for the Dept. of Homeland Security at www.usajobs.opm.gov. Go to the Agency Search and type in the agency name. You can select "all jobs" and "all locations" to see all of the job titles. This part of the game – learning about the government job titles, locations and reading the "duties" section in the announcement.

Next a jobseeker/player has to match his/her skills, interests and experience with the agency services and mission (Step 3, Find Vacancy Announcements). This is gamesmanship at it's best. A farmer who is tired of farming could work for Natural Resource Conservation Corps (USDA agency) communicating with farmers about lending and rural development programs available to help them stay in business. These job titles include Soil Conservationist, Soil Scientist, District Conservationist and many others. You can find these job titles at www.usajobs.opm.gov also. Go to Agency Search; type in Agriculture; select your agency within the Dept. of Agriculture. There are many agencies that would be of interest to farmers and food, plant and animal professionals who are changing careers.

Philip N. Diehl, former Director of the United States Mint, writes, "There are many ways to serve ... The demand is clear for skills related to intelligence analysis, law enforcement, customs, inspection, immigration processing, food-safety assessment, scientific research, and airline baggage inspection. But less obvious skills are also in great demand. For example, government reforms mandated by Congress have imposed

rigorous requirements on Federal agencies to put their financial books in order. This has opened excellent opportunities for skilled accountants and financial analysts throughout the government. The need for such skills has been strongly reinforced by Federal initiatives to track down the sources of terrorist funds and Congressional mandates for closer oversight of corporate governance.”

It’s not intuitive for a jobseeker to know the government job titles. The serious jobseeker has to research the federal job title that matches his/her experience, education and skills. One more unusual example is for the Program/Management Analyst. Many people do not understand the Program/Management Analyst job title or duties. Ligaya Fernandez, Sr. Policy Analyst writes, “The Program/Management Analyst positions are very important in government ... yes, these positions are critical in government. The government does not provide products to the public. The government provides services. These services are based on programs that government policymakers have determined the American public needs and wants, and they pass laws to make sure that these services are provided to the people. ... The basic qualifications needed for these types of jobs is the knowledge of the theories, function, and processes of management so that analysts can identify problems and recommend solutions. ... In sum, I would say the importance of this series is this: Important government program decisions are made based on what Program/Management Analysts recommend, so candidates for these jobs better be good!”

For the most determined jobseeker, the Career Interest Center at www.usajobs.opm.gov will analyze skills, knowledge and abilities and come up with a list of Federal job titles that will fit his/her experience (Steps 4 and 5, Find your Federal Core Competencies and Analyze Vacancy Announcements for Key Words). I completed the quiz myself and one of the job titles recommended for my skill set was Training & Curriculum Development Specialist! Right on target! That was fun!

See what I mean? If you explore websites for jobs, agencies and job titles, you never know what you can find – and how you can fit into the government. This is a big part of playing the game successfully – learning about the elements – the agencies, jobs and functions of the jobs.

Now the next challenge in this sport is finding a “real” job that you can apply to. It’s important to understand that some job listings (called vacancy announcements) are “open to anyone,” other announcements are “open to current employees or merit promotion only.” So be careful not to fall into this pit. Select the announcements that are good for “anyone” unless you have been in the government, been in a war, are disabled from the military, are a person with a disability, or have other job eligibility considerations. For most people trying to get in, look for announcements that say “Open to Anyone,” or click “NO” under Applicant Eligibility on

the USAJOBS website.

The next hurdle you have to jump is to **select your best grade or salary**. The Office of Personnel Management's website (<http://www.opm.gov/oca/payrates/index.asp>) lists salary listings and grades. You will have to read the announcements to determine exactly which grade your experience qualifies you for. You can also compare your last or current salary with the scale and determine your grade. But that can be tricky because if your last job paid \$90,000, you will probably not be getting that salary in the government to start out. You will possibly start out as a GS 12 making from \$51K to \$66K. But, if you land a job in government, you can apply for promotions in a year or so. For jobs at the \$20K to \$40K level, the salaries are actually better than private industry offerings (especially these days).

Texts and resources that are helpful for the Federal Job Search Gamer include the main rule book, *Ten Steps to a Federal Job*, and the federal job search websites. The Ten Step approach is the simplest formula for understanding the steps to applying for and landing a federal job – **the ultimate success in playing the Federal Job Search Game**. The next source would be websites with job listings. We've discussed www.usajobs.opm.gov, but there are other sites for federal job listings also. For the fastest geographic go to www.federaljobsearch.com. John Keville, producer, makes the geographic search an absolute joy. There are 1211 jobs in California and 30 jobs in Monterey County. I found this information in about 10 seconds with two screens! You can't see the entire vacancy announcement without paying a toll, but you can see the agency name, job title, salary and one sentence. I use this site when I'm on the radio nationwide. Also, www.fedjobs.com is a good site for a complex geographic search and provides free e-mail announcements on jobs that fit your profile. Sandy Harris, Publisher, has done a very good job with listing federal jobs. This one has a small fee also, but is worth the dollars for the extra search capabilities.

Now, back to the game – it's time to write. After study and research, continued play (Steps 6, 7, 8) requires creating your application. You have to write your **"paper" federal résumé, an electronic résumé, a set of Knowledge, Skills & Abilities narratives and a cover letter**. These written tools will take you 5 to 15 hours to research, write, edit and target. Look at federal résumé samples to help you build your best résumé content. Make sure you write the right format and submit the right format! This is critical to your success! The KSAs—a separate part of some applications—are a mystery and stopping block for many people. But they are simply narratives that represent answers to typical interview questions, such as: What is your ability to communicate orally? For this question, you would write about how you talk to customers, team members, vendors,

co-workers, supervisors. You would write about a situation where you presented a briefing, solved a problem, planned a meeting or interviewed people to find some information. This is just story-telling about a job-related successful experience.

When you start applying for jobs (Step 8, Applying for Federal Jobs), **your application can actually be “rated and ranked” by the human resources staff.** The total number of points available is not known to a jobseeker. So, you simply have to try to reach the highest point possible. That means you have to make your resume and KSAs outstanding – for maximum points – you hope!

To improve your odds with the unknown grading scheme, you have to do some of your own research so that you can rate the top points. If the position is a Budget Analyst position, you have to research the keywords, skills, knowledge and abilities that are desired in the job. You may have to be clever to find these skills. They could be written in the vacancy announcement beautifully, and be clear and understandable. But it's possible the job listing is skimpy and generic. The clever researcher will go to another agency's job listing and look for the same job. Maybe they have a better job write-up. Or you can go back to www.usajobs.opm.gov and go to the Career Series section and look for the competencies for this particular job. Or you can go to www.opm.gov and find the “classification standard” for this job (unless the job is brand new and there is no classification standard). This is where the most persevering, determined and clever federal jobseeker/enthusiast will succeed. This research is important so that the application matches the skills needed in the job.

Another factor is **concentration, focus and understanding the other players.** As in many sports, you react to the mood and expressions of the other players. In the Federal Job Search Game, your other players are the human resources professionals who are very busy with lots of applications. They might be handling more than one recruitment project, so your application could be among hundreds. You want to stand out, be better qualified and get to the next playing level (which is be forwarded to the hiring manager). You have to play the game right to make it past Human Resources. That means reading the instruction on the announcement carefully (Step 8, Applying for Federal Jobs). If they say to that you should go to a certain website to submit your résumé online, answer 51 questions, write 7 essays, and answer profile questions, then that's the drill. Just do it all. If they say to mail or fax the package, that's it. Read the directions carefully.

The next level of the Federal Job Search Game is to follow up on your applications (Step 9, Tracking and Following Up on Applications). It gets tense 30 days after you have submitted and you haven't heard a word from anyone. This level requires savvy, persistence and patience.

Yes, you should send an e-mail or call the HR recruiter listed on the announcement (of course, keep your announcements and packages). Ask them kindly if the recruitment is still active and what the status is. This is where your charm and kind consideration come into play. You want to get to know them. Developing a relationship with HR is critical in this sport. They can tell you lots of things if the timing is right. They can tell you that the “Cert” has been created. The “Cert” is their lingo for the list of best qualified candidates. This Cert is the precious list of referred candidates who are forwarded to the next level. Oh, to be on the Cert is great! Then you have to wait until the hiring manager (or even a panel of experts) reviews the people on the Cert (which includes your full application package). They will decide if they want to talk to you or meet you. Oh, this is tense. Yes, you want to talk to them and meet them.

How can you stand out again at this level? The game is really tensing up now. The odds can be 3 to 1, 10 to 1, 30 to 1. The hiring manager can receive 3, 10 or 30 applications to select the applicants to interview. Your game strategy has to ensure that your package will **stand out before a busy hiring manager!** Think about the manager when you are writing your package, remember that they are the leaders of the program, supervisors of the staff. They want valuable members of their team (that’s you) who care about the mission, customers and programs and who have the best experience to do the job – quickly! Does your résumé reflect your best accomplishments in your previous job? As one last consideration, does your résumé include “core competencies” of the agency (Step 4, Finding your Federal Core Competencies)? The most popular government core competencies are: flexibility, customer service, team eldership/membership, creativity, resourcefulness, initiative, communications skills. Do you stand out above your competition here?

If so, you could get an e-mail, call or letter **asking for an interview** (Step 10, Interviewing for a Federal Job). This is such a thrill! You have a chance for the job! But ... again, back to the game. You have to scurry around and research information about the agency. Find the mission or strategy plan. Re-read about the agency’s programs and services for the American public. What do they do for me anyway? I’m a taxpayer! What are their recent challenges? Moving into Homeland Security, reorganization, relocation, large exiting of senior managers from retirement, new programs, new congressional mandates (this is where Congress gives a direct order to an agency to fix something or do something different with a new regulation), recent media coverage? You have to get really clever and research the job, agency and what’s new, so that you are prepared for anything in the interview. The interview could be with one person, or three or five professionals in the agency. You don’t know the questions. So just be ready to talk. **This is the highest level of**

this game – the Interview.

Now, if you don't win the job, it might not be your fault. Don't take it personally. A person in the office could be a favorite, or another person with better education could beat you to the job. If you get to the interview level, then you are a **Expert Player** and you should just keep playing the game until you win the job.

The average playtime is three to six months. The time per week you can spend researching jobs, editing your packages and following the directions could be five hours per week. This is an intense sport that is always with you. Just listening to the news can affect your job search. If you hear a story about a particular federal agency, this can affect your game. That agency might be one that interests you and could affect your future job. If you're interested in the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and a hurricane was just discussed on the weather, that can affect a future job!

The exciting part of this Job Search Game is that it is complex, challenging and rewarding. The winners are clever, persistent and determined. People are hired into government jobs everyday. We get e-mails from them. Here's one from an executive federal jobseeker:

Finally, eleven months after working with you on my first SES application, I have landed a much better position in a much better agency. The lessons I learned from you on how to write it the way they want to read it were invaluable. This vacancy announcement had five difficult open-ended KSA questions, and I know I made it to the interview round because of the quality of my answers. Those answers benefitted greatly from the methodology, organization and style guidance I learned from you while working on the ECQ's. Thanks again for all of your help and encouragement.

In conclusion, every time an applicant lands a Federal job, I realize what a success it is. The complex federal employment and hiring process make it seem like a game, not a job application. I feel that if a person understands the rules/10 Steps that he/she can land a meaningful job that can span his/herentire professional career. So the Federal Job Search "Game" IS worth the time and effort to learn and become an expert in the process.

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