

How the Federal Government Actually Works: The Reflective Experiences of a University Research Administrator Who Took a Federal Government Job (VA)

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Abstract: *Even though research administration is governed by one body of law and regulations within the United States of America, there are many differences on how these laws are implemented. These differences are determined by the type of entity (Federal, state, non-profit, corporation) and may have further laws and regulations imposed by the state in which the organization is located. This paper will compare the differences of internal processes associated with operations, financial, and personnel management between a U.S. Federal Government agency and private sector organizations within the United States through the experiences of a seasoned U.S. research administrator who transitioned into Federal service near the end of her career.*

Keywords: *Research, Administration, Management, Government, Financial*

Problem Statement

Research Administration/Management appears to be similar to other institutions in the United States of America. This is due to the U.S. Federal Government (USG) creating and maintaining laws and regulations for the country. The system provides for states and subsidiary units to also maintain laws and regulations, as long as they do not contradict the USG's laws and regulations.

However, experience in the private sector does not prepare someone for a job in the USG (at least in the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs), even in research administration, due to the culture and organization of each type of institution. So, what does one need to know to make a smooth transition between a private sector entity and a U.S. Executive Department?

Observations

Business and public administration theories provide the foundations for research administration, but with various caveats. The variances, arising from laws, regulations, and policies imposed by sponsors and/or Federal and state governments, focus on facets specific to research administration. Therefore, a trained body of professionals to oversee the administration of research has been developing over the decades.

However, being a successful research administrator with nearly three decades of advancement and experience only provided the foundation for service in the U.S. Federal Government. After accepting a research administration position within the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), it came to light that the VA is a divergent entity; beginning with the Oath of Office, both

signed and oral, with witnesses, to be impartial and uphold the U.S. Constitution. The research administration and business processes may appear to be similar, but are in fact very different. Not only are job titles prescribed by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management, many policies and procedures are also prescribed from the VA central office, also known as VACO, which is the office for the appointed U.S. VA Secretary. One must note that policies are not called policies, but they are titled directives. Procedures may be found in 'Handbooks' and/or SOPs (standard operating procedures) at a particular VA. Additionally, each VA is provided the ability to implement the directives and general procedures in a way that best serves the veterans who frequent its facility.

As one searches and applies for external funding for his/her project, the pre-award process has many similarities. The Principal Investigator (PI) determines which funding announcement s/he will pursue, creates the proposal, and provides it for review and submission; however, the procedures to accomplish this endeavor have many deviations. In addition to applying for funding from different U.S. agencies or other sponsors, the VA has its own research funding that is available only to VA employees with at least a 5/8th (62.5%) appointment. A person who works full-time for the VA is considered an 8/8th appointment. The 8ths configuration was a new experience. Additionally, the agency requires its researchers to secure funding from the VA to maintain a position within the agency, regardless of other external funding. The result is that a PI could maintain a million dollar externally funded portfolio, but lose his/her position if s/he does not maintain VA funding. The only exception is if the PI is a full-time appointed physician.

The VA funding requires similar forms that are completed differently. The Health Services, Research and Development (HSR&D) funding is one portion of the research funds in VACO. The Cleveland HSR&D process will be described. Note, the process may vary at each of the 168 medical centers. The process is determined by the Medical Center Director in consultation with the ACOSs (Associate/Assistant Chief of Staff) and incorporates the Medical Center Director's level of acceptable risk for assorted items.

The difference with the pre-award process starts with an Intent to Submit (ITS) or a Letter of Intent (LOI) application, through the agency's portal. This requires the research office's official to submit the ITS/LOI. However, prior to the submission, the PI needs to obtain approval from the Research & Development Committee (R&D) to submit. To gain this approval, a research routing sheet is completed, along with two completed review forms from non-team members, abstract template, budget template, letter of support from other Services (if required), letter of support from the Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs, if utilizing these facilities), data management and access plan, and conflict of interest disclosure for all PIs. Within the VA, a service is the equivalent to a department. In turn, if the PI is utilizing other departments (i.e. medicine, laboratory services, etc.), the PI must obtain a letter of support that the department is willing to work with the PI. The support letter must include any requirement that will be imposed upon the project.

All deadlines within the government are mandatory. If the information is not received by the date listed on the meeting sheet, it will not be reviewed by the committee. If it is not reviewed and approved, there will be no submission. There are no exceptions. After providing the packet for R&D review, the PI will begin the actual proposal that will be submitted to the VACO area

(i.e. Health Services Research & Development) through Grants.gov. Naturally, this process is concurrent; however, it is expected to be subsequent. The process of proposal creation is very similar to the variety of universities and medical centers where previous employment was held. The PI provides the research office the proposal and necessary forms for review and submission through Grants.gov.

Even though the proposal submission appears to be very similar to the non-federal entities (same forms & web portal), there are many differences within this process. It begins with an Intent to Submit (ITS) application, through the agency's portal. Once accepted, the PI must follow the dedicated VA Application Guide SF424 (R&R), which describes the requirements for the VA. The PI must be thoughtful in creating the title of the project, since whatever is submitted in the ITS is the title for the grant application. The SF424 face page and Research Related forms are completed the same, except the budget pages have different requirements. The difference in the budget pages are the fields that are to be completed on the SF424 form. In the Senior/Key Person section, one is only to place the PI, no additional persons. The Other Personnel section is where the effort, salaries and fringe for all others involved with the project are listed as one person. Finally, all other expenses are listed under the Other Direct Costs on a blank line as "All other direct costs". The budget justification document must include a Summary Budget Worksheet, as well as the budget justification. One must note that medical personnel are never to receive funding from the VA research projects. This restriction includes non-VA medical personnel working with the VA.

The Summary Budget Worksheet breaks out the costs by budget period of salaries and fringe for the PI and Other VA Personnel. The number of unique persons must be placed in the field as well as a total of calendar months. Additionally, it breaks out equipment, travel, and other direct costs by budget period. If the project has multiple VA sites, there is a separate summary budget worksheet for each. This is like having subcontracts. The balance of the budget justification must list each person, degree, role, number of calendar months, the General Services (GS) level and step, the portion of 8/8th the person is working for the VA, the total salary and fringe for the full project, followed by for what each person will be responsible by site. If the project is requesting travel funds (Figure 1), one must describe the reason for travel, as well as a prescribed format in a table of who will be traveling, whether the person is VA or not, purpose of the travel, the destination, amount of time traveling and the estimated cost of travel.

Traveler	Status (VA, IPA, or consultant)	Purpose	Destination	Date	Estimated Cost
Happy G. O'Luckee	VA	Train study team	New Castle VAMC	2 days	\$1034
Doh Pei	VA	Train study team	New Castle VAMC	2 days	\$1034
Rogers Nelson	consultant	Train study team	New Castle VAMC	2 days	\$1462
Total					\$4070

Figure 1. Budget Justification Format: Travel.

The Attachments on the R&R are the same, including the Project Summary/Abstract, Project Narrative, Bibliography & References Cited, Facilities & Other Resources, and Equipment. However, the Other Attachments are prescribed and have prescribed specific file names (Figure 2):

See the VA-ORD Service-specific FOA/RFA for guidance on required attachments and appendices for application submissions.		
Attachment Template	Required Filename	MS Word or PDF Template
1. Introduction to the Revised Application (response to Reviewers)	01_VA_Intro.pdf	01_VA_Intro.doc
2. Specific Aims	02_VA_Specific_Aims.pdf	02_VA_Specific_Aims.doc
2a. Research Plan	02a_VA_Research_Plan.pdf	02a_VA_Research_Plan.doc
2b. VA Career Plan	02b_VA_Career_Plan.pdf	02b_VA_Career_Plan.doc
2c. Mentoring Plan	02c_VA_Mentoring_Plan.pdf	02c_VA_Mentoring_Plan.doc
3. Progress Report <u>and</u> Publications from the Previous Funding Period	03_VA_Prog_Report_Pubs.pdf	03_VA_Prog_Report_Pubs.doc
4. Human Subjects	04_VA_Human_Subjects.pdf	04_VA_Human_Subjects.doc
5. Vertebrate Animals	05_VA_Animals.pdf	05_VA_Animals.doc
6. Multiple PD/PI Leadership Plan	06_VA_Multiple_PI.pdf	06_VA_Multiple_PI.doc
7. Consortium/Contractual Arrangements	07_VA_Agreements.pdf	07_VA_Agreements.doc
8. Signed Director's Letter	08_VA_Director_Letter.pdf	(Scan to PDF)
8a. R&D Committee Letter	08a_VA_R_D_Committee_Letter.pdf	(Scan to PDF)
8b. Letters of Support	08b_VA_Letters_of_Support.pdf	(Scan to PDF)
9. Data Management and Access Plan (New October 2016)	09_VA_DMAP.pdf	09_VA_DMAP.pdf
10. Appendix 1**	10_VA_Appendix_1_descriptor.pdf	10_VA_Appendix_1_descriptor.doc
11. Appendix 2**	11_VA_Appendix_2_descriptor.pdf	11_VA_Appendix_2_descriptor.doc
12. Appendix 3**	12_VA_Appendix_3_descriptor.pdf	12_VA_Appendix_3_descriptor.doc

** Only Appendix names may have additional text added to the name (i.e., 10_VA_Appendix_1_Response). Such additions will, however, result in a "warning" from eRA Commons indicating the attachment name(s) may not be correct. This warning should be ignored.

Figure 2. VA-SF424 Attachments.

The balance of the pre-award process is the same. The proposal goes to the research office for review and approval. It is submitted through Grants.gov; however, if you submit the proposal two days prior to the deadline, the PI is able to review and correct any errors that may have occurred during the transmission. Once the deadline occurs, this ability ends.

Post-award processes are more similar, with a few caveats. The Just-in-Time (JIT) notification arrives in the research office. The PI must provide the necessary documents for transmission and the research office uploads the documents into the system. But here again, the documents are different. HSR&D requires a Quad chart, revised Budget Justification if any changes are required, an OMB Exemption Brief, as well as the Associate Chief of Staff (ACOS) Just-in-Time (JIT) Assurance Document. Once HSR&D accepts the documents, an award sheet is processed and the funds are transferred on a quarterly basis with the expectation that these funds will be expended during the grant period. If the award is for a pilot program, the JIT requires notification of the approved human subjects protocol. This protocol requires both the approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the R&D committee. The ACOS will provide this assurance after the R&D Committee approves the grant.

Accounting within the Federal Government is very segregated to ensure proper disposition of taxpayer funds. After three years in the position, the actual numbering system is not fully understood by me. Payroll is handled through the Department of Defense Financial Services and the information is returned to the services for which the person is assigned. In this case, it is the medical research division. The person's pay is designated by percentage to his/her assigned projects. Transferring a specific dollar amount is not possible. If the projects are funded by operations monies, the division requires discussion with the VA Fiscal Services division on who and what percentage should be applied to the fund. Only in rare instances are historical transfers of salary executed. If a mistake is made, it is expected to be corrected through reallocation of the future salary distributions. This creates difficulties when managing personnel on grants with other VA medical centers. Should a partner determine a person should no longer work on a specific project, the execution of this decision will occur in future distributions even if this decision was made previously and the information was not forwarded to the appropriate accounting personnel in a timely manner.

Management of the balance of grant purchases requires following standard procedures. The government staff work on a first in, first out (FIFO) basis. This reduces the effect of favoritism. Each type of purchase requires following a process. To obtain a contract (purchase order/PO) listed in the proposal with a non-VA entity, one must provide substantial documentation. It requires the Purchase Request form, an explanation of why this vendor should be selected over all other vendors (form) and documentation to support the explanation. Additionally, a form with the information for the selected vendor must accompany the request. The request is routed through the Fiscal Service person to the contracting group. This group is independent of the medical center/agency of origin. Again, this group's workload is performed on a FIFO basis. When the request finally reaches the head of the line (this could be three to six months later), it is analyzed by the contracting officer to ensure that all documents support the request. Should

the contracting officer determine that a different vendor is able to supply the item/services; the contracting officer will award the PO with the different vendor. Smaller purchases are readily made through a request (form) to the assigned purchasing agent. All vendors must meet certain requirements for the PO to be executed. The purchase of paper, pens, envelopes, postage, etc. is never allowable on a project.

If a grant includes a person from an affiliated organization, an Interagency Personnel Agreement (IPA) is required. These agreements are utilized to pay the associated entity for the effort from their employee. Basically, an IPA is an agreement in which the Federal Government hires the entity's employee for which the Federal Agency's unit does not have the expertise or time to perform the specific work. Depending on the person and the affiliated organization, these agreements are able to be executed within 60 or 365 days. The two variables that determine the length of time are 1) if the originating agency has someone who can oversee the internal steps, while 2) ensuring that the affiliated organization executes the agreement in a timely manner. The Federal government has processes to follow in the order in which it is prescribed. Communication with the appropriate person within the Federal Agency is paramount in reducing the time required for execution. VA Northeast Ohio Healthcare System (VANEOHS) requires that the date on the IPA is 30 days in advance to provide time to obtain the VANEOHS' Medical Center Director's signature.

If the project includes travel, the process requires a memo of approval from the supervisor, in addition to the details of the request. This is forwarded to the travel group within VA Fiscal Services. The group will determine if the hotel is allowable, or they may book you with a different hotel. The airline is selected by determining which airline is able to have the person arrive at the appropriate time. One is only able to provide a preference of airline and hotel. Fiscal Services determines what is best for the agency.

The USG is an organization that is accountable to the people through fairness and equity and not just a burdensome bureaucracy. An understanding of how the government functions from within provides an appreciation as to why working with the USG requires more time to execute agreements. The difference in requirements between the USG and private sector in all processes reflect the requirement to be transparent with taxpayer dollars and to work for the public interest.

Evaluate and Analyze the Emergent Concepts

As a research administrator, this paper will discuss the main points of administration, then address its applicability to research administration through the experience of a prior university director of research who took a job in the Federal Government's Executive branch within the Department of Veterans Affairs with experience in public and private universities, a public medical center, a non-profit, and corporations.

Background

Societies are characterized by two distinct sectors—the public and the private. The public sector is monopolistic, providing essential services, while the private sector is competitive, with

alternative sources for the goods and services it produces (Division for Public Administration and Development Management, United Nations, 2007). Even though the private sector is characterized as competitive, over the last century, capitalism has had a major influence over the focus of the U.S. government.

The private sector's goal is to make the most money for the organization. Once the Industrial Revolution began, various fields of administrative scientific research began (i.e. management, economic development, organizational theory, etc.). Organizational Theory is based on Fredrick Taylor's 1911 book entitled *The Principles of Scientific Management*. Lewis, Passmore and Cantore (2008) summarize:

Effectively it gave managers a story of 'righteousness' that supported their right to run the business in the most productive and profitable way regardless of the views of the employees. It did this by making it possible for managers to refer to a higher-order authority or power than their own personal whim, in this case the power of science as expressed through the authority of logic and reason. (p. 13)

Lounsbury & Ventresca (2003) found that as the field of Organizational Theory developed, research focused on "issues of relevance to managers and leaders of for-profit enterprises, which in turn focused attention on questions of internal organization structure and process as well as the relationship between organizations and their resource environments" (p. 461). In the 1990s, there has been a reemergence of social structural approaches to organization analysis (Lounsbury & Ventresca, 2002). The refocus of the field drew its inspiration from some conceptual methodological resources that interface with sociological subfields on organizations, stratification, culture and politics (Bourdieu, 1984; Breiger, 1995; Mohr, 2000; Scott, 1995).

The influence of the private sector's efficiencies, structure, and culture created change in the public sector. In the 1930s, the U.S. public sector changed due to the New Deal liberalism and became the foundational system for governance (Orren & Skowronek, 1998). Orren & Skowronek found that through various reorganizational legislation enacted by the U.S. Congress in the 1930s and 1940s, the rearrangement of agencies and relationships produced influential stabilizing governmental operations. By the 1970s, this arrangement came under severe strain and through a new governmental reorganization, it marginalized the bureaucratic influence (Coleman, 1996). With marginalization of the U.S. bureaucracy and changes within the educational system, the understanding of how the U.S. government functions has been minimized within the citizenry.

Today, private sector management still has the goal and focus of making the most money for the owners and stockholders. However, organizational culture and structure has changed since the beginning of automation. The comparison of research administration between private and public sectors will be viewed through operations, financial management, and personnel management.

Operations

The field of organizational theory developed as a means to analyze organizations. After a review of field work, Dwight Waldo wrote in 1978: "Organization theory is characterized by vogues,

heterogeneity, claims and counterclaims" (p. 597). The Industrial Revolution (private sector) and the need for improved Public Administration (public sector) created the Classical perspective of organizational theory. The focus of organizational theory is structure, culture, leadership, efficiency, accountability, and responsibility (Waldo, 1978; Weber, 1978; Taylor, 1911; Smith, 1776).

When analyzing private and public entities' structures, they appear to have many similarities. Most universities, non-profits, and corporations have a governing board, president/chancellor/executive director, vice presidents/directors/managers, faculty, and staff, while corporations also have owners. The actual title used is determined by each institution or system.

A university may be a private or public entity. If the university is a public entity, with the change in budgeting that has occurred over the last few decades (i.e. lower allocations) it must still raise external dollars through grants and donations to balance its financial statements. A public university functions more like a private university due to these lower allocations.

When someone speaks of the USG, most often, s/he is referring to the employees of the Executive Branch, as will be done here. The USG has a President and Congress (436 person - governing board), Secretaries (23 person - vice presidents), upper level governmental employees a.k.a. Senior Executive Service (~7800 person - faculty), general governmental employees (~1,350,000 - staff), and owners (taxpayers). The titles are regulated by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management. These structures are compared in Table 3.

Structure	University	Non-Profit	Corporation	U.S. Government
Type	Public/Non-Profit/For-Profit	Non-Profit	Private	Public
Owners	Taxpayers/No one/ Shareholders	No one	Shareholders	Taxpayers
Governance	Board of Directors/Trustees	Board of Directors	Board of Directors	President/Congress
Organizational Lead	President/Chancellor	Executive Director	Chairman/CEO	Secretaries
Management	Provost/Vice Presidents/Chancellors	Directors/Managers	Vice Presidents	Under Secretaries
	Associate Vice Provost/ President/Chancellor			Directors/Chief of Staff
	Deans/Directors		Directors	Administrative Officer
			Managers	Supervisors
Employees	Faculty		Supervisors	Area Leads
	Staff	Staff	Staff	Staff

Figure 3. Organization structure comparison.

Even though universities, non-profits, corporations, and the USG are similar in structure, most similarities end there. This is due to how each organization is created and under which laws and regulations it functions.

Private entities are created by a person or people and the owner(s) create the mission and goals. Public entities are created by the U.S. Constitution and federal and/or state laws. The mission is incorporated into the law that provides for the public entity's creation. From this point forward,

public universities will be included in the private sector entities group due to being two levels below the Federal Government.

When accepting a position in a private sector job, one may or may not need to sign an employment contract depending on the institution and/or position. When accepting a job in the U.S. Federal public sector, after all the signatures have been executed, one must sign and take an Oath of Office, which is a sworn and written statement to uphold the U.S. Constitution and the U.S. laws and regulations. Even though U.S. research administrators adhere to organizational applicable laws and regulations, the USG has to adhere to all Federal laws and regulations. Vowing to uphold them places them at higher level of focus (reverence) for USG employees. The use of public sector here forward will focus only on the Federal Executive branch.

Today, one hears a lot about “Institutional Culture.” It was the institutional culture that allowed sexual harassment or racism to occur. But, an institution’s culture is more than harassment. Soeters, Winslow and Weibull (2006) find that culture is the product of the social environment and that includes the norms, ideas, values and meanings. Considering how an organization is created, the culture of the organization begins at this point. When a person enters the private or public sectors, the organization has a distinct culture, since the culture of the organization is about the goals of that entity. In general, private sector is about making the most money, while the public sector is about “public interest” (Joyce, 2016). Private sector employees focus on advancing the mission of the organization, making money, and complying with applicable governing laws and regulations within the budget provided, while public sector employees focus on fairness, public interest, and obeying all laws and regulations within the budget provided. Obviously, not all private sector entities totally focus on money, as non-profits focus more on their social mission; however, they all must make a profit in some manner in order to maintain the business. The focus of the organization creates the institutional culture.

The institutional focus for the private sector is different. Since organizational culture is formed through the organization’s mission, policies and procedures, one is able to understand that some private sector organizations are less transparent than the public sector. For example, most universities and non-profits’ culture focuses on their mission, which usually is posted on their website; they are externally focused with an internal component and measured by stability. After reviewing multiple large corporations’ websites, a mission statement was not to be located. This is due to the private nature of corporations; therefore, they are internally focused and measured by profitability. Nearly all the private sector’s actions occur in private, while government actions take place in the public (Joyce, 2016). The institutional focus for the public sector is on the “public interest” without bias by obeying all the laws and regulations (orders), is law and process focused and is measured by achievement of outcomes. These focal differences affect the culture of the organizations.

An institution’s culture affects information flow and processes. Even though information flows within all structures, the degree and authority does not. Both sectors have delegation of authority. In the U.S private sector the authority can be rescinded easily. For example, if the supervisor

determines that the person who has been delegated authority is not performing as expected, s/ he is able to remove the delegation to protect the interests of the entity. If the administration determines that the issue requires dismissal, the process is executed, and a person could be released as quickly as a day or two, acknowledging that this process is country specific. The process within these organizations is simpler as the private sector only has to abide by the laws and regulations that affect the entity. The flow of information in the private sector is more fluid. Communication occurs more directly between levels and with other parallel units. Within the private sector, business confidential information is not available to the public and usually is not available to everyone within the organization, but internally, the employees know the policies and procedures and follow them.

In contrast, the current U.S. public sector began developing during the first Session of the first U.S. Congress in 1789, Congress created various U.S. Federal Departments: Foreign Affairs (State), War (Defense), and Treasury (Library of Congress, Unknown). Over 58% of the first Congress had military experience with 85% of Congressmen having held officer positions; in turn, they, along with President Washington, fashioned these departments in a manner that aligns with the military structure (First Federal Congress Project, 2012). Like the military, the information flow within the USG is through a chain of command on a “need to know” basis (Atuel & Castro, 2018). A public sector’s employee only has the authority of the position regardless of the employees’ experience or abilities. There is no expansion of duties/authority (Redmond, et al, 2014). For example, if a U.S. Federal employee becomes AWOL (absent without leave), there is a process through which this is handled. Which process is utilized depends on the reason associated with AWOL. The USG process is overseen by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management and the Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB). If a person is suspended over 14 days or is removed, s/ he usually has appeal rights to the MSPB (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 2017). Dismissal is further controlled by legislation, since Congress enacted the Lloyd-LaFollette Act of 1912, which stated that removal actions must be for merit-based reasons and not inappropriate causes, such as whistleblowing. Finally, due to the ever-growing complexity of personnel rules over time, Congress further reformed the personnel laws and regulations in 1978 with the Civil Service Reform Act and related Reorganization plans. The law provides for the MSPB standards; prohibited personnel practices; divided responsibilities between MSPB and the U.S. Office of Personnel Management; and finally, provides that personnel authority would be exercised by the individual agencies.

In addition to the authority distribution, the USG employee is expected to follow the directions (commands) of the superior. Asking for information must go up the chain of command, and the person provided with the authority will ask the unit’s person of authority for the information. The second person of authority will ask for the information from his/her subordinate. Upon receiving the information, the second person of authority will provide the information to the first person of authority, who will then provide the information to the requestor. Information about policies and/or procedures are readily available, but only if one knows how to locate the item. This is due to how the public sector is structured. Communication is not fluid within this structure. Public sector procedures are very detailed. A portion of each procedure will be provided to the person

who is responsible for that portion of the process. Only after trust is built between the employee and the person with authority will information potentially begin to flow more readily. This results in highly structured processes for the public sector. It reduces ability and flexibility of lower staff to be able to provide complete information to the private sector.

In turn, if the private sector needs information from the public sector, they need to direct their questions to the person of authority. For instance, a Director of Research in the private sector is equal to the AO/Research or the Administrative Officer of Research. This person oversees all personnel within their division and is usually the only person able to provide the full necessary information to the private sector.

The culture of a public vs. private sector entity is determined by its creation, mission, and organizational structure. The culture of private sector entities focuses on mission and goals with their social environment focusing on outcomes. The culture of public sector entities focuses on its legislatively established mission with their social environment focusing on compliance (obeying orders).

Reviewing the organization, culture, and information flow of the public and private sectors, the implications for private sector research administrators are: 1) communications between sectors are difficult at best and impossible at worst, due to the differences due to the organizational structures; 2) public sector's information, procedures and processes are segregated to task, while the private sector's information, procedures and processes are more fluid; and 3) locating the appropriate person with whom to speak in the public sector can be daunting, but can be overcome with research and knowledge of with whom to communicate. Extracting information from the public sector becomes easier when one understands that s/he needs to communicate with the commander, as the troops (lower personnel) are delegated to a mission by the commander in which to execute.

Financial Management

Accountants learn the practice of accounting; along with theory, Financial Accounting Standards Board (FASB) and/or Governmental Accounting Standards Board (GASB) standards and generally accepted principles of financial management during their education. Upon graduation, they enter the workforce to utilize this education. Even though every institution may process income and expenses differently, these transactions must align with the applicable FASB and GASB standards. Additionally, accountants are taught to be skeptical of transactions. This skepticism is to ensure that the expense is appropriate, budgeted, allotted, and approved appropriately. If these conditions are met, the expense will be processed for payment.

Research financial management is incorporated into the entities' financial statements. Large universities will have either a specific office or a group of accountants who handle the account establishment, oversight, reconciliations and/or invoicing. Within smaller private sector institutions, the general accountants may be responsible for the financial oversight. Depending on the general accountants' understanding of research, this may result in conflicts between the

research and the financial portions of the entity.

Financial management within the USG is different. It is not an acceptable practice to transfer funds between agencies. In turn, if the research is funded by a different agency, the funds must go to a non-profit foundation associated with the agency. The VA has foundations (i.e. National Association of Veterans Research and Education Foundation ([NAVREF]) at most medical centers that are specifically created by law to handle the funded research from other agencies and non-federal sponsors. If the funded research is within the same agency, i.e. from central VA to a medical center, the part of the award is transferred on a quarterly basis. For these grants, account establishment, oversight, and reconciliations are handled by the research office within the particular VA. If the research is funded by a different agency or non-federal sponsor, then account establishment, oversight, and reconciliations are handled by the NAVREF staff through their system.

The way items are processed in the public vs. private sector are very different. The public sector is very linear and divided, while the private sector has the freedom to process items differently, as long as the items are recorded in compliance with applicable governmental laws and regulations. An example of a public-sector purchase is: A person at the VA wants to purchase copier paper. Here it is quite simple. The person informs his/her ADPAC (Automated Data Processing Application Coordinator). The ADPAC enters the information into the system and if it is an internal order, the item will arrive to the unit within 3 business days (or less). In the private sector, a person ordering the item will go to the designated person who does the ordering; however, if it is something that is of high necessity, the person is able to walk the paperwork through each area to expedite the process. Most of time, paperwork expedition is not possible in the public sector, as the public sector functions on the FIFO basis. Only a person in high command could alter the established process on a rare occurrence.

Personnel Management

In general, all employees of the USG must be U.S. citizens to work. The private sector is able to hire any legal alien and/or citizen. This requirement may be different in U.S. states, as each state is able to determine what is acceptable for employment within the state's government system.

In the private sector, often one is able to negotiate his/her salary within a set structure for the position. The private sector has to follow U.S. labor laws and classifications that are applicable only to the entity. A person's title may be more flexible, especially after being employed with the entity for a time. Within the private sector, a position will be classified with a wage range; however, various titles may be used for similar positions. Private sector position titles can be changed readily as well as have flexibility within the entities' pay structures.

The personnel structure of the public sector is established by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management. The General Schedule (GS) position structure has fifteen grade levels and ten steps within grade. Advancement through a grade is determined by the length of time in a particular step. The length of time is shorter (1-2 year/s) in the lower steps and longer (3 years) in the higher steps. USG employees are structured by classification, title and rank. Classification depends on

which of the twenty-three (23) occupational series a position aligns. Titles are created within that series with specific minimum requirements for holding the position. The title determines the rank (Grade) and is performed by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2019).

For example, every person in the same geographical area, grade and step will be compensated at the same rate. Of the 168 VA medical centers in the U.S., forty-two geographic areas have a locality payment. This payment is set to subsidize employees in higher cost-of-living areas as found in Public Law 111-84 Section 1911, the Non-Foreign Area Retirement Equity Assurance Act of 2009. These areas are separated from the General category where all non-specified VAs are placed. Figure 4 randomly compares wages for an entry-level position (GS 1) through the ten steps (which is truncated for brevity) within the USG.

Grade 1 Wages for selected cities						
	Locality %	Step 1	Step 2...	Step 3	Step 9	Step 10
General pay scale	0.00%	18,785	19,414	22,891	22,915	23,502
Kansas City-Overland Park-Kansas City, MO-KS	16.10%	21,809	22,540	26,576	26,604	27,286
Las Vegas-Henderson, NV-AZ	16.49%	21,883	22,615	26,666	26,694	27,377
Albany-Schenectady, NY	16.50%	21,885	22,617	26,668	26,696	27,380
Buffalo-Cheektowaga, NY	19.18%	22,388	23,138	27,281	27,310	28,010
Cleveland-Akron-Canton, OH	20.08%	22,557	23,312	27,488	27,516	28,221
Atlanta-Athens-Clarke County-Sandy Springs, GA-AL	21.16%	22,760	23,522	27,735	27,764	28,475
Portland-Vancouver-Salem, OR-WA	22.53%	23,017	23,788	28,048	28,078	28,797
Dallas-Fort Worth, TX-OK	23.40%	23,181	23,957	28,247	28,277	29,001
Philadelphia-Reading-Camden, PA-NJ-DE-MD	24.59%	23,404	24,188	28,520	28,550	29,281
Chicago-Naperville, IL-IN-WI	27.47%	23,945	24,747	29,179	29,210	29,958
Boston-Worcester-Providence, MA-RI-NH-CT-ME	27.48%	23,947	24,749	29,181	29,212	29,960
Washington-Baltimore-Arlington, DC-MD-VA-WV-PA	28.22%	24,086	24,893	29,351	29,382	30,134
Los Angeles-Long Beach, CA	30.57%	24,528	25,349	29,889	29,920	30,687
New York-Newark, NY-NJ-CT-PA	32.13%	24,821	25,652	30,246	30,278	31,053

Figure 4. Entry-level USG wages.

The organizational culture has major effects on processes of that organization. The culture also “significantly impacts knowledge and knowledge management” (Lehman, 2017, p. 55). In turn, having an understanding of how the U.S. Federal government is organized may reduce the learning curve for new employees.

Reflect and Recommend Solutions

Being part of the U.S. Government has been a very sobering journey. I am an educated public administrator and a trained research administrator. When joining, I had 25 years of experience in the field and worked within multiple public and private universities, consulting, and a public hospital during this time. Over the course of my career, I had advanced myself into two different positions as a Director for the entity’s research offices. I entered the position at the VA with

confidence in my leadership, accounting, research and public administration skills, only to realize after five months that I had no clue as to what I was doing within the USG. I felt that I had entered a military organization.

During a meeting, I was asked “Why do you need to know?” for which I was shocked that an answer to my question was not provided. In turn, I explained what I did know about how research administration worked outside the USG. After which, my CO (commanding officer) provided me all the information and more. Her Budget Analyst and I work well together and have the fiscal portion of my job down pat. My interpersonal skills provided me the ability to accomplish things for which my supervisors (not formal) were amazed.

During my first year, I learned that the Cleveland VA IRB considered a veteran subject as vulnerable as an impregnated incarcerated juvenile subject. Hence, the six-month delay in receiving IRB approval for a minimal risk protocol (see Figure 5). Budgeting within the USG is precise and highly regulated. With more than 30 years of accounting experience, it took three months to have a basic understanding of what is allowable and the revision process which I am still learning. Budget revisions are difficult and basically not allowed for personnel. This is understandable, considering the salary payments for all of the VA’s 377,000 plus personnel in addition to other Federal departments are handled by the Department of Defense Finance and Administrative Services. It took nearly 1.5 years for someone to mention this fact to me.

Item	Length	When	Prior Length
Initial training	10 days	November 2015	.25 days
Prepare first IRB	3 weeks	November/December 2015	1 week
Reconcile unit’s budgets	4 days	December 2015	.25 days
Safety training	.5 day	December 2015	Never
Purchase first item	5 days	January 2016	1 hour
Request budget revision	1 day	January 2016	<1 hour
Learned budgeting process	3 months	January-March 2016	<1 hour
Proposal development	-	April 2016	-
IRB Continuing Review	2 weeks	April 2016	1 day
Begin process to hire 2 staff	-	May 2016 (early)	.25 days
Appointment Scheduling training	5 days	May 2016	-
Budget revision approved	-	June 2016	(immediately)
Positions posted	-	June 2016 (late)	(within the week)
IRB approved	-	July 2016	(within the month)
Interviewed candidates	-	July 2016 (early)	(within the month)
Candidates offers sent	-	July 2016 (late)	(within the week)
Candidate 1 began employment	-	August 2016	~ within two weeks
Candidate 2 began employment	-	September 2016	~ within two weeks
Internal proposal submission	-	September 2016	2 days prior deadline
Meeting with CO	.25 day	October 2016	1 hour
Annual training	1.25 days	October 2016	Never
Grants.gov proposal submission	1 day	November 2016	2 days prior deadline

Figure 5. First year of learning vs. prior employment.

In contrast, with my previous understanding of hiring processes, I was able to complete the process within three months from start of paperwork to offer. My informal supervisors had warned that the process is at least six months from start to offer.

Three years later, I am comfortable with the processes. I now have an understanding of how the Federal Government really works (at least my VA). I have informally advanced to a position of 'authority' knowing that the true authority for things resides up the ladder with my CO who is responsible for all research personnel. We work very well together and often things are deferred to me to handle for the CO's approval. If I had a mentor or an 'insider' who would have directed me over some of the hurdles, it would have been an easier transition.

My recommendation to the private sector is to realize that first and foremost, the USG's mission is to be unbiased and comply with all federal laws and regulations. This means that items are handled on a first come first served basis. Unless one is speaking with a person of authority, you may only receive the information that is known at the lower levels. Each General Service (GS) level is provided with only the necessary information for that level and position. In turn, know with whom you should speak and begin the process with that person.

Authors' Notes

The contents of this article does not represent the views of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs or the United States Government.

This article is based on a presentation accepted and presented at the SRAI 2018 annual meeting. The author has nearly 30 years of experience in progressively responsible positions in research administration and was a PhD student of Public Policy and Urban Studies, but due to life circumstances, she did not complete the final two chapters of her dissertation. Much of the information in this article comes from the knowledge learned from education, as well as literature review, and on the job training.

As an aside, my late husband received his wish, which was "if you had been in the military, you would know how a team works." I am the closest I ever will be to military service and it is an honor to serve those who were willing to protect the country's freedoms, our Veterans.

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