

ISSUES OF MERIT

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Workplace Aggression: Undermining Physical and Psychological Safety

Research demonstrates that workplace aggression can harm employees' ability to do their work, even in remote work environments.

It is widely accepted that a supportive work environment, characterized by fair and effective supervisors and helpful coworkers, can lead to positive outcomes. These include heightened employee satisfaction, increased retention of good performers, and improved individual and organizational performance. Indeed, that is a fundamental premise underlying diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility initiatives—that a workplace that works for everyone benefits employers and stakeholders as well as employees.

In contrast, the reality for some Federal employees is that the workplace is neither supportive nor inclusive. Instead, it is threatening because they experience workplace aggression: they are attacked, openly or covertly, by supervisors, coworkers, or others. Results of our 2016 Merit Principles Survey indicate that 36 percent of respondents experienced one or more of the workplace violence or aggression behaviors listed on the survey within the 2 years prior to completing the survey.

What is workplace aggression? Workplace aggression covers a wide range of behaviors and effects, including the following:

- Physical violence resulting in death or injury;
- Threats and intimidation that undermine a sense of safety and security; or
- Ambiguous or covert actions—such as sabotaging work, withholding cooperation, and excluding an individual from work communications or social activities—that undermine an individual's success and confidence and tear the social fabric that holds teams and organizations together.

For a wider perspective on workplace violence and aggression, the survey included behaviors ranging from physical assault to verbal aggression. As shown in the figure on the next page, physical aggression is rare. Therefore, many of the experienced behaviors could occur either at the physical jobsite or while working remotely, as so many employees have been doing over the past 2 years. Thus, its effects may not be visible or immediately apparent, but as discussed below, the damage is nevertheless quite real.

How does workplace aggression harm employees and organizations? Studies show that the damage caused by an instance of workplace aggression can be both lasting and widespread. For example, studies have shown the following:

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The MSPB Office of Policy and Evaluation conducts studies to assess the health of Federal merit systems and to ensure they are free from prohibited personnel practices.

Issues of Merit

We offer insights and analyses on topics related to Federal human capital management, particularly findings and recommendations from our independent research.

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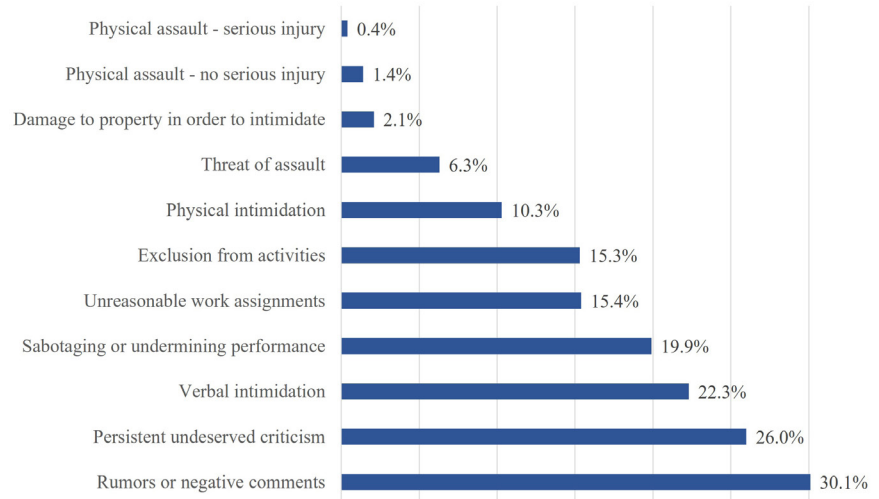
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Percentage of Employees Experiencing Workplace Violence/Aggression



- Aggression, including seemingly mild forms such as rudeness or discourtesy, can be “contagious.”¹ For example, an employee who is mistreated by a supervisor or coworkers may, in turn, act rudely towards other coworkers or members of the public.
- Harsh criticism can undermine communication and teamwork to the extent that the quality of decisions can be negatively affected.² In settings such as health care and emergency response, this can have life-or-death implications. But the implications for collaboration and organizational performance in other contexts are quite clear.

In our survey results, Federal employees who experienced even one of the workplace violence or aggression behaviors differed from those who had not. They were **more** likely to plan to leave the organization in the next 12 months. In addition, they were **less** likely to:

- Be satisfied with their supervisor or manager;
- Feel a spirit of cooperation and teamwork in their work unit;
- Feel treated with respect or comfortable being themselves at work;
- Be inspired to do their best work; and
- Recommend their agency as a place to work.

Taken together, the results of our survey, as well as other research-based studies, demonstrate that workplace aggression is both real and harmful. This aggression need not be physical in nature, as most employees did not experience physical violence. However, even more subtle forms of aggression can erode the ability of employees and the organization to perform effectively. ❖

¹Foulk, T., Woolum, A., & Erez, A. (2016). Catching rudeness is like catching a cold: The contagion effects of low-intensity negative behaviors. *Journal of Applied Psychology*. 101(1), 50–67; Walker, D.D., van Jaarsveld, D.D., & Skarlicki, D.P. (2017). Sticks and stones can break my bones but words can also hurt me: The relationship between customer verbal aggression and employee incivility. *Journal of Applied Psychology*. 102(2), 163-179.

²Cooper, W.O., Spain, D.A., Guillaumondegui, O., Kelz, R.R., Domenico, H.J., Hopkins, J., Sullivan, P., Moore, I.N., Pichert, J.W., Catron, T.F., Webb, L.E., Dmochowski, R.R., & Hickson, J.B. (2019). Association of coworker reports about unprofessional behavior by surgeons with surgical complications in their patients. *JAMA Surg*. 2019 Sep 1; 154(9):828-834; Riskin, A., Erez, A., Foulk, T., Kugelman, A., Gover, A., Shoris, I., Riskin, K., & Bamberger, P. The impact of rudeness on medical team performance: A randomized trial. *Pediatrics*. 2015 Sep; 136(3):487-95.

Reforming Hiring: What's the Best Way Forward?

Establishing more flexibilities may not be the best approach to reform Federal hiring.

In June 2021, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) announced that agencies can select and reinstate certain former Federal employees—without competition—to a position at any grade level. Before, competition was required to place the former employee in a higher-graded position held before leaving Federal service. (This digest greatly simplifies both the authority and OPM's thinking—check out OPM's regulations for the full story.) OPM's rationale for this change is that it removes an unnecessary barrier to returning to Government service and enables Federal agencies to more readily benefit from the skills and experience that a person gained outside the Federal sector.

Fair enough; Federal hiring has many barriers and it's reasonable to think that some need to be removed or rethought. That said, this latest effort to streamline Federal hiring does raise some questions.

First, how much can any small increase in “flexibility” do to reshape the Federal workforce? Data suggests that reinstatements are not a major pipeline for most occupations or agencies, as reinstatements have accounted for only 3 or 4 percent of accessions in recent years. The new flexibility might indeed make reinstatements more common, but there's little reason to expect that this will be a transformational change.

Second, how much can an incremental change to title 5 policy do to make hiring more understandable or transparent? A consistent theme in Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) studies of Federal hiring is that agencies often face a proliferation of hiring authorities that have specific limits on eligibility (who may apply), coverage (what positions can be filled), or organization (who can use the authority). That proliferation has several possible consequences. For instance, applicants are often hard-pressed to know whether or how to apply for a Federal job—even after carefully reading the job announcement. Also, it may contribute to a common belief among Federal employees that selections are sometimes influenced more by an applicant's special status than by their actual qualifications. In addition, the effective and compliant use of hiring authorities is already impaired by confusion among managers and the human resources (HR) staff. Even if a flexibility seems worthwhile, does it distract policymakers and agencies from the larger task of making the system (competitive examining) and its core authority more functional?

Finally, what is the implication of additional flexibility for the goals of making Federal hiring more efficient and transforming HR offices from enforcers of rules to management consultants? The many ways to compete for a Federal job mean that a hiring manager may receive *several* lists of candidates. And it usually falls to the servicing HR specialist to produce those lists (and they need to be right, not just “close”). As a former staffing specialist, I would have to admit that the time spent determining and documenting applicants' eligibility and placing candidates on various lists was substantial—and that time wasn't spent talking to managers or thinking about workforce planning or competency modeling. At a systemic level, the complexity added by a new flexibility makes it difficult to reengineer hiring processes. That may be one reason why HR specialists often report that they are overwhelmed by transactional work and have little or no time for work that is consultative, let alone transformational.

To close, we note that OPM did not simply issue the regulation and declare victory. Instead, OPM has announced that it will assess agency use of this authority through its on-going work or a separate focused evaluation. This provides an opportunity for OPM to see how well the flexibility is working and make any adjustments. My thought is that this assessment might provide another opportunity—to get a clearer sense of whether and how Federal hiring can be reformed through incremental changes to title 5, or whether it is time for OPM to propose (and policymakers to consider) a much further-reaching reform. ❖



Acting Director, Policy and Evaluation

A Brief Look at Authorities for Hiring Students and Recent Graduates

The merit system principles call for agencies to recruit qualified individuals from appropriate sources to achieve a workforce from all segments of society. We often hear that agencies have a difficult time recruiting and hiring younger employees, especially students and recent college graduates. For instance, Federal employment statistics indicate that only 7 percent of the permanent, full-time Federal workforce is under the age of 30; 14 percent is 60 years or older.

Students and recent graduates bring unique perspectives and skillsets to the workforce. Programs designed to hire these candidates are important tools that help agencies build a talent pipeline for Federal occupations. There are several primary Governmentwide authorities used to recruit and hire students and recent graduates. These include delegated examining, the Pathways Programs, and most recently, the interim regulations OPM released for hiring recent graduates in response to 5 U.S.C. § 3115 and post-secondary students in response to 5 U.S.C. § 3116. To help agencies think about how to improve their ability to attract and hire students and recent graduates, below is a table that briefly describes some of the different aspects of each authority. Follow the links in the chart or more information on each program.

Is it a competitive service appointment?	Is public notice required?	Does veterans' preference apply?	Does rating & ranking apply?	Grades (or equivalent) & positions covered?	Restrictions on number hired per fiscal year (FY)?
Delegated Examining: This is used to fill competitive service jobs with applicants applying from outside the Federal workforce or Federal employees who do not have competitive status as defined by 5 CFR § 212.301.					
Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No restrictions	No restrictions
Pathways Internship Program: This program is for current high school, vocational, technical, undergraduate, and graduate students from accredited or other qualifying schools who are pursuing a qualifying degree or certificate. An agreement setting expectations between the intern and agency is required.					
No, but conversion possible after program requirements completed	Yes	Yes	Yes	All	No restrictions
Pathways Recent Graduates Program: This program is for individuals who graduated with qualifying degrees or certificates within the previous 2 years (or up to 6 years for qualifying veterans). An agreement with the graduate is required, as well as mentorship, a training plan, and 40 hours of training per year.					
No, but conversion possible after 1 year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Up to GS-9 for most occupations, but GS-11 and 12 for some	No restrictions
Pathways Presidential Management Fellows Program: This program is administered by OPM and provides leadership development opportunities to individuals who have received advanced degrees within the preceding 2 years. A participant agreement is required, as well as mentorship, a training plan, 80 hours of training per year, and at least one developmental assignment.					
No, but conversion possible after 2 years	Yes	Yes	Yes	GS-9–12	Determined by OPM
5 U.S.C. § 3116, Hiring Authority for Post-Secondary Students: This authority helps hire certain post-secondary students into professional and administrative positions at specified grades in the competitive service.					
Yes, time-limited with conversion to permanent possible after program requirements completed	Yes, but specifically no requirement to post on USAJOBS	No	No	Up to GS-11, professional and administrative positions only	May not exceed 15 percent of the number of students appointed the previous FY in the competitive service*

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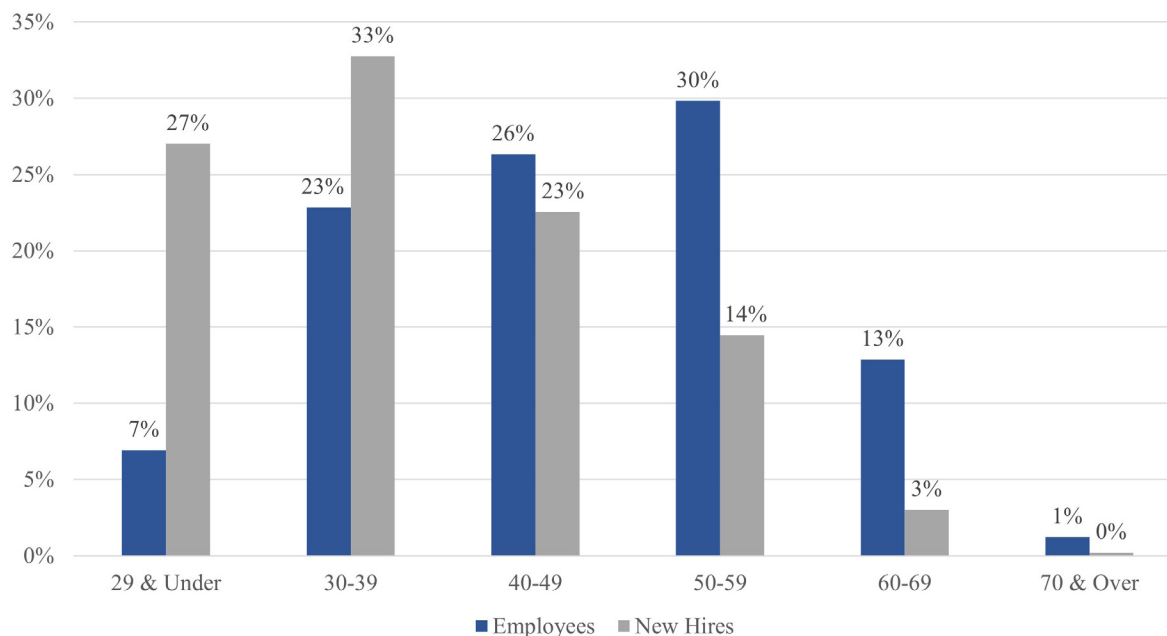
Is it a competitive service appointment?	Is public notice required?	Does veterans' preference apply?	Does rating & ranking apply?	Grades (or equivalent) & positions covered?	Restrictions on number hired per fiscal year (FY)?
5 U.S.C. § 3115, Hiring Authority for College Graduates: This authority helps hire individuals who graduated with a baccalaureate or graduate degree into professional and administrative positions at specified grades in the competitive service. To be eligible, the applicants must have received the degree within the previous 2 years or have been discharged from at least a 4-year service obligation within the previous 2 years.					
Yes	Yes, but specifically no requirement to post on USAJOBS	No	No	Up to GS-11, professional and administrative positions only	May not exceed 15 percent of the number of appointments made the previous FY to like-positions in the competitive service*

* For example, if an agency appointed 100 students or recent graduates into covered competitive service positions in FY 2020, then they could conceivably use this authority to appoint up to 15 students or recent graduates in FY 2021. Follow the chart's links to interim regulations for both authorities for more details.

Workforce Snapshot: FY 2020 Age Distribution

In FY 2020, the average age of a Federal employee was 47 years old, and the average age of a new hire was 39. To many, that won't seem like much of a difference. Further, only 7 percent of the Federal workforce was under 30. These data points suggest that the Federal Government does not effectively recruit or hire younger people. However, a closer look shows that over one in four new hires in FY 2020 was under 30. Whether that rate is enough to establish a solid pipeline for Federal occupations is up for debate. ❖

Age Distribution of Federal Employees and New Hires, FY 2020



Source: Enterprise Human Resources Integration-Statistical Data Mart (EHRI-SDM), FY 2020

Easing the Transition Back to the Office

Thinking about how to reduce anxiety as employees transition back.

In the September 2021 *Issues of Merit*, we encouraged agencies to use lessons they learned from the pandemic to inform future telework policies. Today, many Federal agencies are scaling back from maximum telework after almost 2 years of remote work, and many employees are feeling anxious about the transition. Pulling from a review of recent research, we have identified a few ideas that could help ease that anxiety.



Apply to the office what you learned about yourself from teleworking. A recent article in the *Harvard Business Review* points out that being anxious about returning to work—like reacclimating to any previous routine—can be uncomfortable. The author suggests allowing yourself to feel as anxious as you normally would starting a new job, and know that everyone else is anxious as well. Like reentering the water after having basked on the beach, you will get used to it again. Back at the office, you will find many different attitudes about the need for precautions, desire for socialization, and ways of coping. The article advocates for “tolerance, acceptance, and refraining from gossip” to help ease the way. Furthermore, reflect on what you learned about your preferences from working at home and try to incorporate these into your new (but old) work location. For example, if employees enjoyed better quality lunches and later office hours at home, try to configure your new routine accordingly.¹

Find opportunities for relief from workplace anxiety. Employees and employers should pay attention to the need for mental health support in the workplace. In a recent interview with the nonprofit news organization Marketplace, mental health expert Amanda Fialk pointed out that few organizations have created a culture where people feel that they “can talk about their mental health concerns and take time to take care of themselves.” She recommends creating opportunities to practice self-care in the workplace (e.g., sponsoring support groups, promotion of employee assistance programs (EAP), or just acknowledging your own and others’ anxiety). She recommends availing yourself to earned time off if you are experiencing extreme stress. Organizations may consider having a quiet space to meditate or practice mindfulness and may remind employees about recreational options at work. Activities like going to the gym, yoga classes, or runs/walks at breaks or after work may be helpful. Additional steps that may help are good sleep habits, taking time for fun with friends, and avoiding excessive social media where anxiety is sometimes replicated and reinforced.²

Allow autonomy, communicate openly, and be kind. In an article on supporting employee mental health in the transition back to work, the American Psychological Association (APA) recommends that employers ease uncertainty by giving each employee control and decision-making power over where, how, and when they work.³ In MSPB’s 2012 study *Federal Employee Engagement: The Motivating Potential of Job Characteristics and Rewards*, we showed how granting employees’ autonomy (e.g., flexibility in working remotely or setting working hours) may improve engagement—the sense of personal connectedness to the work we do. The APA article recommends the same autonomy as a means for reducing workplace anxiety. The article goes on to emphasize that organizations should show concern for employee well-being by offering compassion, honesty, and openness while actively listening and communicating frequently, further reducing uncertainty. Also, managers should be trained in mental health literacy and how to talk about mental health, psychological first-aid, and how the EAP system works.⁴ Finally, the article suggests involving employees in discussions about their workspace, what might change, and what they need to cope. Employees who are informed and participate in decisions about their own space have greater psychological comfort in the workspace.

As more agencies require at least partial return to the office, there are things that both employees and their leaders can do to ease this transition and reduce anxiety and uncertainty that linger as artifacts of the pandemic. ❖

¹ Boyes, A. (2021). Why you’re so anxious about going back to the office. *Harvard Business Review*.

² Brancaccio, D. and Conlon, R. (2021). Why people are anxious about returning to the office, and what to do about it. *Marketplace*.

³ American Psychological Association. (2020). Psychology Topics-COVID-19, Supporting employee mental health when reopening the workplace.

⁴ For more information, see <https://www.apa.org/practice/programs/dmhi/psychological-first-aid>.

Retirement as a Retention Tool

Research shows that retirement benefits influence Federal employees' decision to remain in a job.

When a new employee is onboarded, there is a lot to cover, and retirement education may simply consist of a pamphlet explaining that the Federal Employees' Retirement System (FERS) includes a basic benefit plan (aka, annuity), the Thrift Savings Plan (TSP), and Social Security. However, research suggests that this benefit can be an exceptional retention tool.

In its *2019 Federal Employee Benefits Survey Report*, OPM noted that nearly 70 percent of respondents indicated that a retirement annuity influenced their decision to remain with the Federal Government “to a great extent,” with another 20 percent reporting that it influenced their retention “to a moderate extent.” The TSP was also popular, with 82 percent reporting it affected their decision to remain to a great or moderate extent. What may be particularly important is that both the TSP and annuity had a greater influence on respondents' intent to remain than they had on the initial recruitment of those employees (69 percent reported the TSP had a great or moderate impact on their decision to take the job, and 79 percent reported the same for the annuity).

When seeking to retain workers in high-demand fields, it may help to remind employees that a vital nest-egg is growing in the background. The typical FERS annuity is 1 percent for each year of service (with an increase to 1.1 if retirement is after age 62). Over the course of a career, that adds up to a substantial and stable revenue stream for retirement. Similarly, the TSP offers matching funds and boasts one of the lowest operating costs of any investment platform. Both benefits are portable to other agencies. Also, employees become vested in FERS after 5 years, meaning they may be eligible for an annuity when they retire, even if they move in and out of service throughout their career.

The key to turning the retirement plan into a valuable retention tool is education. Reminding employees where they can find personalized and specific information will cost agencies little and might put the longer-term benefits of a public service career in the forefront of their minds. For instance, the Annual Personal Benefits Statement can spell out for each employee where they stand and where they are headed. Simply ensuring employees know how to find it can illustrate the value of the benefits and show that a non-Federal job that offers a higher salary or bonus is not necessarily a better deal. Similarly, free webinars from the TSP can help employees make better-informed plans and remind employees of the rewards that a Federal job can offer beyond the satisfaction of a career in public service.

Some Federal employees may be more aware of their benefits package than others. But, in an era where so much change is happening in how and where people work, every extra selling-point for public service may matter—and retirement benefits are one area of employment where the Government may be well positioned for retaining talent. ❖

The President's Management Agenda

In November, the Administration published *The Biden-Harris Management Agenda Vision*. The document identifies the top three priorities for the President's Management Agenda: (1) strengthening and empowering the Federal workforce, (2) delivering excellent Federal services and improved customer experience, and (3) managing the business of Government to build back better, specifically how the Federal Government buys products and services. The ultimate goal “an equitable, effective, and accountable Government that delivers results for all.”

Under Priority 1, the Administration identifies four strategies to strengthen the workforce:

- Improving hiring;
- Increasing employee engagement;
- Expanding workplace flexibilities and technology; and
- Enhancing the role of OPM to support agency human capital efforts.

The next steps of the agenda will be to “translate these priorities and strategies into specific targets with designated leaders who will be accountable for delivery and driving towards measurable outcomes.”