



## *The Importance of Job Fit for Federal Agencies and Employees*

October 2020

### *In Brief*

The Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) previously highlighted the importance of employee-to-job fit in engaging Federal employees to improve agency outcomes.<sup>1</sup> Also, research in the private sector has found that job fit is related to positive organizational outcomes. Using data from MSPB's 2016 Merit Principles Survey (MPS), this research brief takes a closer look at exactly what job fit is, why it is important, and how agency leaders might improve job fit within their organizations.

We found that from over one-half to over two-thirds of Federal employees have high fit in the three different components of job fit identified in the current research. We also found that job fit is related to a number of important workplace outcomes such as job satisfaction, employee engagement, performance appraisal ratings, and an employee's intent to leave. Accordingly, this research brief outlines some actions in areas such as job design, hiring, training and development, and performance management that might help Federal managers and employees improve job fit.

Part of MSPB's mission is to study Federal merit systems to determine if the workforce is managed in adherence with the merit system principles and is free from prohibited personnel practices.<sup>2</sup> We conducted this review of Federal employee job fit because it relates to the merit system principles of using the Federal workforce efficiently and effectively, and providing employees effective training to improve individual and organizational performance.<sup>3</sup> Job fit also has implications for a number of other human resources and management processes, including hiring and performance management.

### *What is Job Fit?*

There are several different ways to describe how employees fit with various aspects of their work lives. For example, employees may or may not feel that they are a good match with their organizations, their colleagues, their supervisors, or their jobs. Much time and effort are expended by human resources staff and hiring managers to locate just the right person to fill a vacancy. By the same token, discerning job-seekers put forth effort to find an employment situation where they are well suited to all aspects of the job including the work, the people, and the organizational culture. Undoubtedly, individuals also make ongoing decisions about whether they wish to stay with a particular organization based on how well they perceive their fit as they maneuver through organizational life.<sup>4</sup>

Researchers have been developing ways to measure different kinds of fit in the workplace for many years. Notably, much has been published regarding job fit, that is, the degree of compatibility between a person and a specific job, and the corresponding beneficial results.<sup>5</sup> This research brief builds on the work of previous researchers by examining job fit, as well as the relationship between good job fit and desirable organizational outcomes within the context of the Federal Government, by examining data from MSPB's Governmentwide employee surveys.

## Measuring the Three Components of Job Fit

The research shows that there are three distinct ways to measure job fit.<sup>6</sup> Job fit has evolved from a relatively simple understanding of whether employees possess the requisite abilities to perform their job, to include whether employees receive something they need from

**Figure 1. Components of Job Fit**

Component	Description
Demand-Abilities Fit	The fit between the knowledge, skills, and abilities of the individual with the demands and requirements of the job.
Needs-Supplies Fit	The degree to which a job fulfills an individual's daily material and psychological needs.
Self-Concept Fit	The degree to which a job's task or purpose aligns with an individual's beliefs about who they are or who they want to be.

the job, and whether employees closely identify with their jobs to the extent that the jobs have become part of the employees' own vision of who they are. Figure 1 provides a brief description of these three components. Each of the components (demand-abilities job fit, needs-supplies job fit, and self-concept job fit) are more fully described below.

### *Demand-Abilities Job Fit*

Early attempts to describe job fit focused primarily on judgements of the similarity between an employee's skills and the demands of the job.<sup>7</sup> This specific type of job fit is referred to as *demand-abilities fit*. Demand-abilities fit emphasizes the match between the knowledge, skills, and abilities of the individual and the demands and requirements of the job.<sup>8</sup>

The survey items we used to measure the different components of job fit were part of MSPB's Governmentwide MPS that was fielded in 2016, and were selected after a review of existing measures of job fit. The survey items that we used to measure demand-abilities job fit are:

- My work is a good fit for my capabilities.
- I like the amount of challenge and complexity in my work.
- I like the variety of tasks and responsibilities in my work.
- My work gives me a good opportunity to apply my talents and strengths.

### *Needs-Supplies Job Fit*

Some researchers believed that solely using a demand-abilities measure to describe job fit was incomplete. After all, it seemed that much was missing from how employees fit into their jobs by just focusing on whether they had the ability to perform the job or not. Therefore, a second component of job fit was developed and is called *needs-supplies fit*. Needs-supplies fit refers to the degree to which an employee's needs are fulfilled by the job. The needs of employees can include a combination of psychological desires, values, goals, interests, and preferences. Among the many things that jobs can supply to fulfill these needs include pay, benefits, training, interesting and challenging work, promotion opportunities, recognition, good working conditions, and decision-making latitude.<sup>9</sup>

As most Federal supervisors have little control over pay and benefits, our needs-supplies job fit measure focuses more on the psychological needs of employees—areas that supervisors (and

even employees) can hope to influence. The survey items used to measure needs-supplies job fit are:

- My work gives me a good opportunity to do things I like to do.
- My work gives me a good opportunity to do things I find interesting.
- My work gives me a good opportunity to do things I am passionate about.

### *Self-Concept Job Fit*

The third and final component of job fit is based on a multi-dimensional construct of an individual's own self-concept. This *self-concept job fit* encompasses the beliefs individuals possess regarding their own personal characteristics and traits. It also consists of values or different roles individuals consider themselves to perform, self-esteem, and the manner in which the individual evaluates the self.<sup>10</sup> Self-concept job fit, then, occurs “when the performance of job tasks produces perceptions and feelings within the individuals that [correspond] with the individuals' perceptions of who they are...and/or the kind of person they desire to be.”<sup>11</sup>

The survey items that we used to measure self-concept job fit attempt to go beyond employees finding interest in, or passion for, their day-to-day work to look for a heightened sense of employees identifying with their jobs. These survey items are:

- My work is the kind of work I want to do.
- My work is a good fit for my personality.
- My work is consistent with my core values and beliefs.
- My work is a good fit for who I am.
- My work is consistent with my personal sense of purpose or calling.

Each survey question included in our three scales had a five-level response pattern: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree. We assigned a point value ranging from one to five to each of the possible responses with Strongly Disagree assigned a value of one, and Strongly Agree assigned a value of five. We considered a respondent to have high job fit if the sum of their scores equated to a response of at least Agree on each scale question. More information about the development of our job fit scales can be found in the Appendix—Methodology.

### *Relationship Between the Different Components of Job Fit*

An employee can have a high level in one component of job fit and low levels in others. For example, if an individual has the necessary qualifications, skills, and abilities to perform the job at an above average level, the individual would possess a high level of demand-abilities fit. However, the same individual might also find that the job fails to satisfy their psychological desires, values, goals, interests, and preferences. This person would have a low level of needs-supplies fit.<sup>12</sup>

A specific example would be an individual trained to be a textile engineer, but who cannot find an engineering position in the area. The individual finds a job as an elementary school science teacher instead. The individual might have the necessary skill and ability to perform the job well and have a high level of demand-abilities fit. The individual would have the opportunity to work in a field related to their training and may find the work interesting and could even have some passion regarding passing along their expertise. The individual would thus also have a high level of needs-supplies fit. But the individual might have a low level of self-concept job fit if the job

tasks do nothing to affirm the image they have of themselves as a textile engineer. “Therefore, such individuals might find little meaning in their work although they possess the needed skill to perform the job well and the job supplies rewards that satisfy certain needs. The same individual may fit the job in some ways but not in others.”<sup>13</sup>

### *Relationship Between Job Fit and Outcomes*

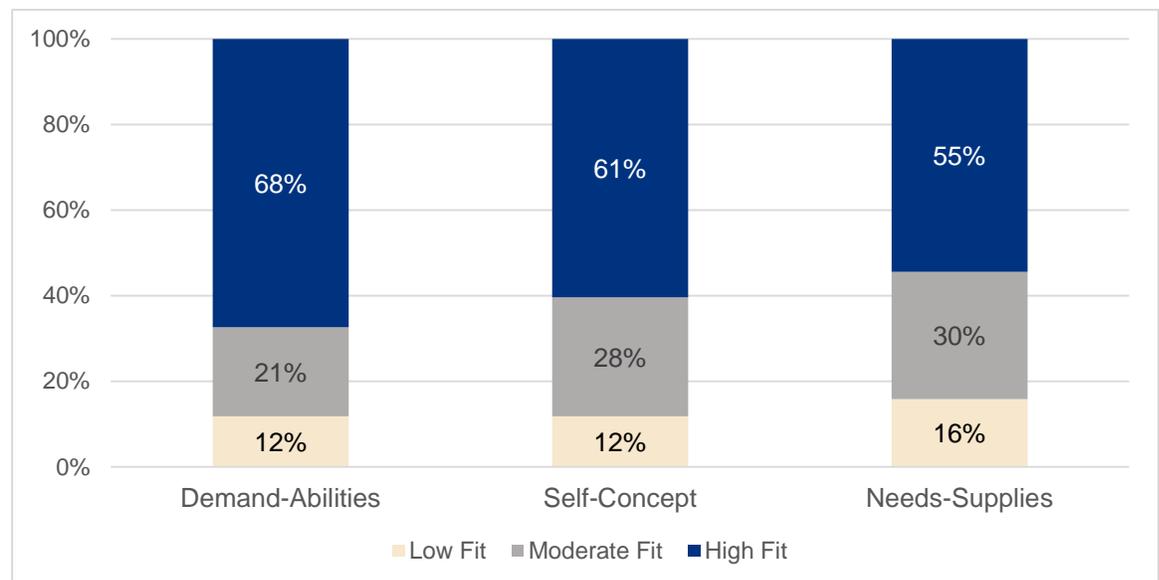
The three components of job fit give us a robust picture of how an employee may or may not fit with their job. It is also important to understand how job fit relates to positive organizational outcomes. Researchers generally agree that different kinds of fit are associated with desirable outcomes. Some studies, however, have failed to find support for the expected relationship between perceived fit and certain outcomes.<sup>14</sup> Other studies have shown that employees’ person-job fit perceptions are related to turnover intention,<sup>15</sup> stress,<sup>16</sup> job satisfaction, career satisfaction, and occupational commitment.<sup>17</sup>

Some research has shown that the different components of job fit perceptions had additive effects on job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions.<sup>18</sup> By “additive” we mean that when the three components of job fit are combined, they predict the outcomes better than when each component of job fit is considered individually. This finding has important implications for good management practices. It suggests that managers should consider all three components of job fit to better manage certain employee job attitudes and behaviors, rather than focusing narrowly on just one component of job fit in selection, career development, and other activities.<sup>19</sup>

### *Job Fit and the Federal Workforce*

Using the job fit scales described above, we examined the level of job fit across the Federal Government. Figure 2 shows the percentage of MPS 2016 respondents who we would characterize as having high, moderate, and low fit in each of the three job fit components.

**Figure 2. Level of Fit in the Federal Workforce for Each Job Fit Component**



As can be seen in Figure 2, more employees have high demand-abilities fit than the other two components of job fit. This, perhaps, is not surprising given that most of the effort in hiring employees is focused on determining whether applicants possess the knowledge, skills, and

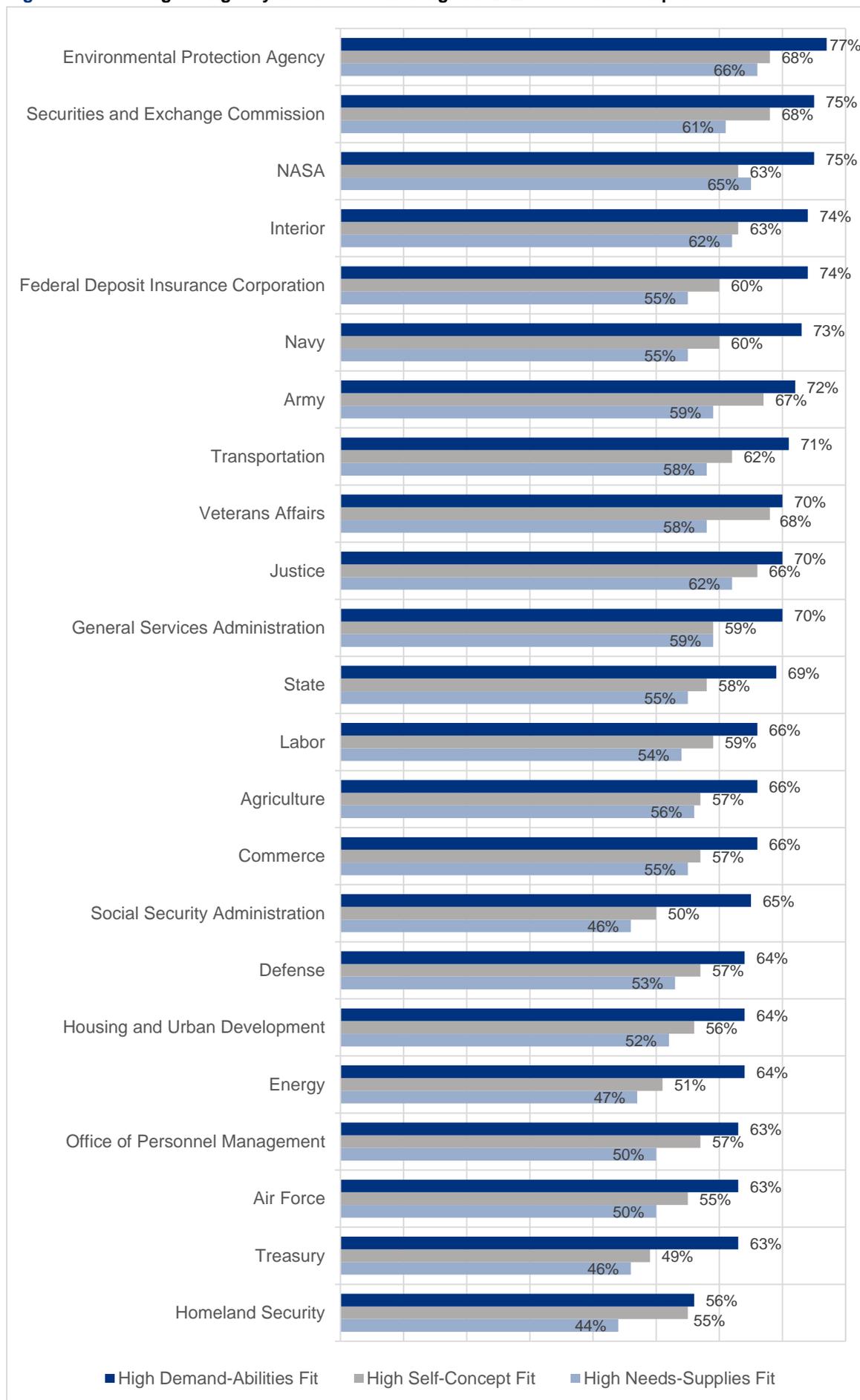
abilities to perform the job. It could also be argued that determining whether individuals possess the requisite ability to perform the job is easier than matching employee emotional needs to those supplied by the job or to matching a job to an employee's self-concept, both of which seem somewhat more elusive. There would still seem to be some room for improvement, though, as we classify 68 percent of the workforce as perceiving they have high demands-abilities job fit. This means almost one-third of the workforce does not have a high fit between their abilities and the requirements of their jobs.

Self-concept job fit may be comparatively difficult to attain, but the Federal Government seems to have an advantage in this area. For a number of years, about 90 percent of employees responding to the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey have agreed that they believe the work they do is important.<sup>20</sup> It is difficult to envision an individual achieving a high level of self-concept job fit—closely identifying with the job—without first believing the work they do is important. In addition, previous Governmentwide MSPB survey results have shown that almost all Federal employees (95 percent) identify with the mission of their agencies.<sup>21</sup> The motivation that Federal employees have to serve the public may also contribute to higher levels of self-concept job fit. Large numbers of respondents agreed with several items about public service motivation that were asked on the MPS 2010 including, “Meaningful public service is important to me” (88 percent agreement) and “Making a difference in society means more to me than personal achievements” (63 percent agreement). When asked if “Being able to serve the public” was important in seeking and continuing employment with their organization, 87 percent of respondents agreed.<sup>22</sup> Affinity for their agency's mission and a desire to serve the public may be two important desires fulfilled by Federal employment that contribute to self-concept job fit.

Improving needs-supplies fit is an area on which organizations should focus as the fewest MPS 2016 respondents displayed high fit in this job fit component. Designing jobs, job tasks, or providing more autonomy to help hold the interest of employees could pay dividends for organizations. Employees themselves should do their due diligence when changing jobs to ensure that the opportunities they consider include tasks or work they can feel passionate about. By the same token, employees should be active participants in the performance management process by voicing constructive ideas to their superiors regarding how their current jobs can be made more interesting or likable. Agency leadership and first-level supervisors should foster organizational cultures where employees feel comfortable playing an active role in the performance management process.

As Figure 2 showed high demand-abilities fit was most prevalent for MPS 2016 respondents across the Government, Figure 3 shows that was true for respondents at the agency level as well. This reinforces our point that matching employee skills with jobs may be easier to accomplish than matching employees with the other two components of job fit. In addition, levels of self-concept fit were higher than needs-supplies fit in all but two agencies. Figure 3 also shows some variation among agencies in the percentage of employees who exhibit high fit in each of the three job fit components.

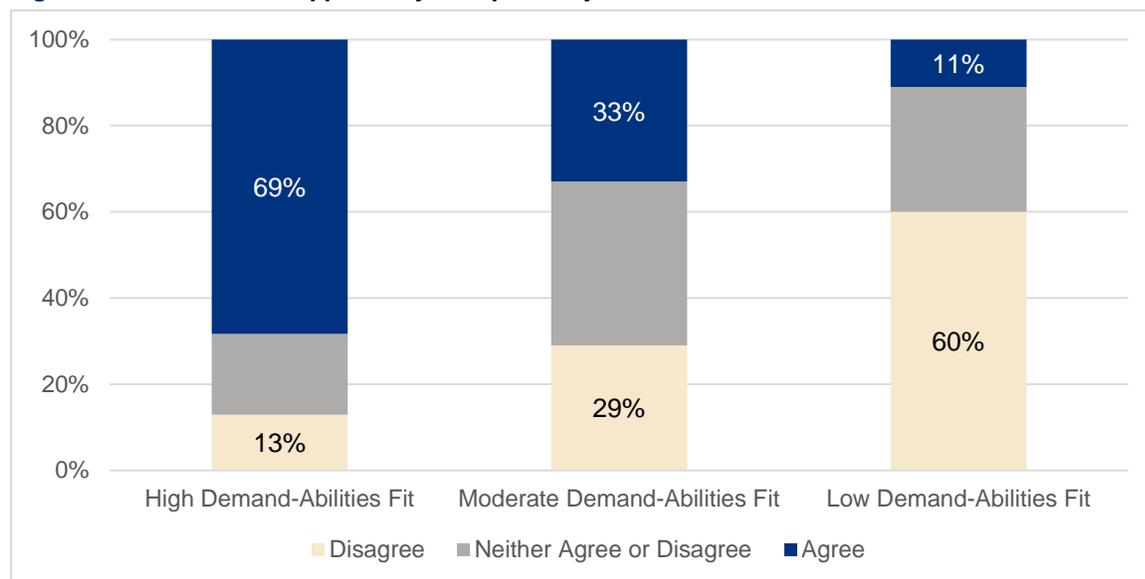
**Figure 3. Percentage of Agency Workforces with High Fit in Each Job Fit Component**



As noted, almost one-third of MPS 2016 respondents perceived they did not have high demand-abilities fit. Sometimes the hiring process does not produce an employee who has all the skills to perform the job, and even if it did, jobs often change over time due to advancements in technology and methods so employees typically need to improve their skills or learn new ones to keep up.

Survey results suggest that Federal agencies might benefit from more active efforts to identify the skills employees need and help employees acquire them. As shown in Figure 4, there is a clear relationship between the level of demand-abilities fit and employee belief about their opportunity to improve their skills. Among respondents with high demand-abilities fit, 69 percent agreed that they were given an opportunity to improve their skills in their organization. In contrast, only 11 percent of respondents with low demand-abilities fit agreed they had that opportunity. Of course employees should take the initiative to keep their skills sharp and organizations need to provide ample opportunity for them to do so. It is especially important for agency leaders to be proactive in identifying skills gaps and methods to close those gaps if they seek to transform the workforce from one way of doing business to another—transitioning personnel specialists from processing work to strategic human resources consultants, for example.<sup>23</sup>

**Figure 4. “I am Given an Opportunity to Improve My Skills” and Demand-Abilities Fit<sup>24</sup>**



### *Hierarchical Job Fit Model*

As instructive as Figures 2 and 3 are in revealing how prevalent the different types of job fit are across the Government, they do not provide a full picture of job fit at the individual level. In other words, measuring the three job fit components separately, at the organizational level, does not tell us enough about the employee as a whole. Data presented thus far does not take into account whether employees exhibited high levels in one, two, or all three job fit components. After all, we would expect an individual who only exhibited high demand-abilities fit to be quite different from an individual who exhibited high fit in all three components.

Therefore, in presenting the rest of our findings, we will employ a hierarchical model of job fit. As noted, high demand-abilities job fit is the most prevalent and also seems to be the most straightforward to achieve. Also, as seen above, high self-concept job fit was the second most prevalent among MPS 2016 respondents while high needs-supplies job fit seems to be the most

difficult to achieve. In our hierarchical model, therefore, we examined four different groupings of survey respondents:

- First, those who did not display high job fit in any area (No High Fit);
- Second, those who displayed only high demand-abilities (D-A) fit;
- Third, those who displayed high demand-abilities fit *and* high self-concept (S-C) fit; and
- Finally, those who displayed high fit in all three areas.<sup>25</sup>

An example of a hypothetical Park Ranger in the National Park Service may illustrate this hierarchy. If an individual possesses the knowledge, skills, and abilities to successfully perform the duties of a Park Ranger there would be a high level of demand-abilities fit. If the individual has a heightened sense of identification with being a Park Ranger, interpreting the significance of different historical properties, and serving the public, there would be a high level of self-concept fit. If the Park Ranger, however, finds themselves over-burdened with daily tasks that they find uninteresting or that they do not enjoy performing (completing mundane reports or attending to trivial administrative matters, for example) there would be a low level of needs-supplies fit. If, on the other hand, such daily tasks were replaced by things that interested the Park Ranger or that they were passionate about, there would be a higher level of needs-supplies fit.

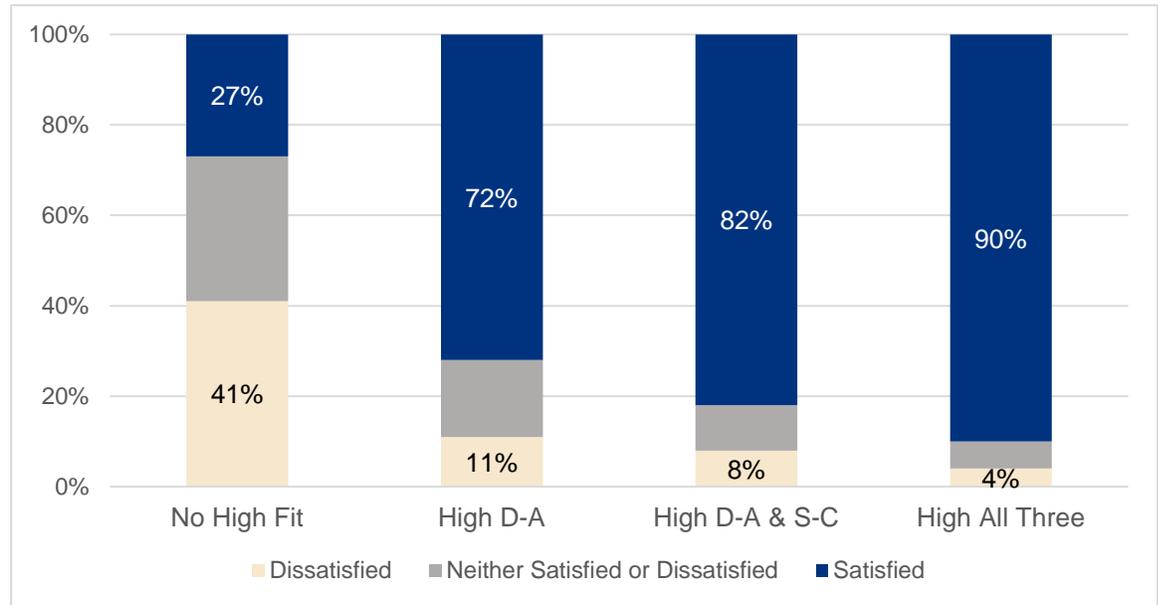
### *The Impact of Good Job Fit*

We found that the three components of job fit had a generally additive positive effect on several different employee characteristics we examined, indicating that the more types of job fit employees possess the better for Federal organizations. Common characteristics among individuals with high job fit were:

- High job satisfaction,
- Increased levels of employee engagement,
- Better job performance, as gauged by self-reported appraisal ratings,
- Less intention to leave, and
- A higher level of organizational responsibility.

#### *Job Satisfaction*

Higher levels of job satisfaction have been shown to result in higher employee motivation, loyalty to the organization, and less absenteeism.<sup>26</sup> As shown in Figure 5, there is a straight-line progression between job fit and job satisfaction. Of those MPS 2016 respondents who did not exhibit any type of high job fit, only 27 percent were satisfied with their jobs. In contrast, 90 percent of the respondents who had high fit in all three job fit components were satisfied. Even achieving only the first step in our job fit hierarchy—high demand-abilities fit—made a large difference in the percentage of respondents who were satisfied with their job. Of the respondents who had high demand-abilities fit, 72 percent were satisfied with their jobs compared to only 27 percent of those respondents who exhibited no high job fit.

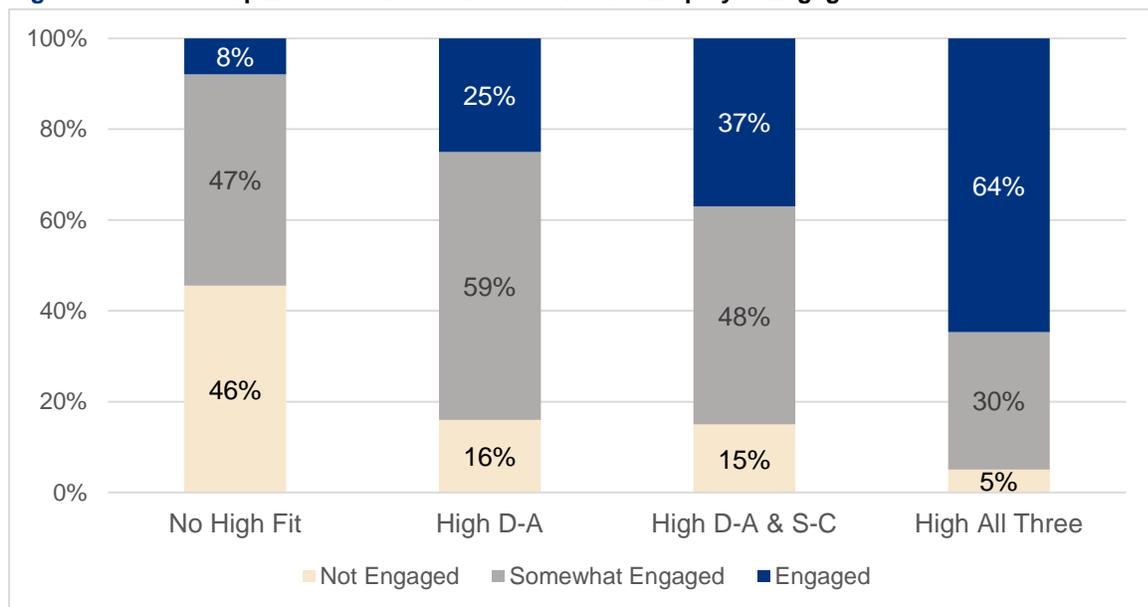
**Figure 5. Relationship Between Hierarchical Job Fit and Job Satisfaction<sup>27</sup>**

### *Employee Engagement*

Previous MSPB research found a relationship between the engagement level of Federal employees and certain desirable agency outcomes.<sup>28</sup> That research defined employee engagement as a heightened connection between employees and their work, their organization, or the people they work for or with. We found that in Federal agencies where more employees were engaged, better program results were produced, employees used less sick leave, fewer employees filed equal employment opportunity complaints, and there were fewer cases of work-related injury or illness.

This same research also noted the importance of person-job fit to establishing and maintaining high levels of employee engagement.<sup>29</sup> Figure 6 illustrates this important association. The engagement level of MPS 2016 respondents improved dramatically as they exhibited high fit in more job fit components. Of those respondents who did not have high job fit, only 8 percent were fully engaged, compared to 64 percent who had high job fit in all three job fit components. In fact almost half (46 percent) of respondents who did not have high job fit were also *not* engaged while only 5 percent of respondents who had high job fit in all three components were likewise not engaged. The relationship between high job fit and employee engagement is important because, as noted, workforces that are more highly engaged produce better outcomes for their agencies.

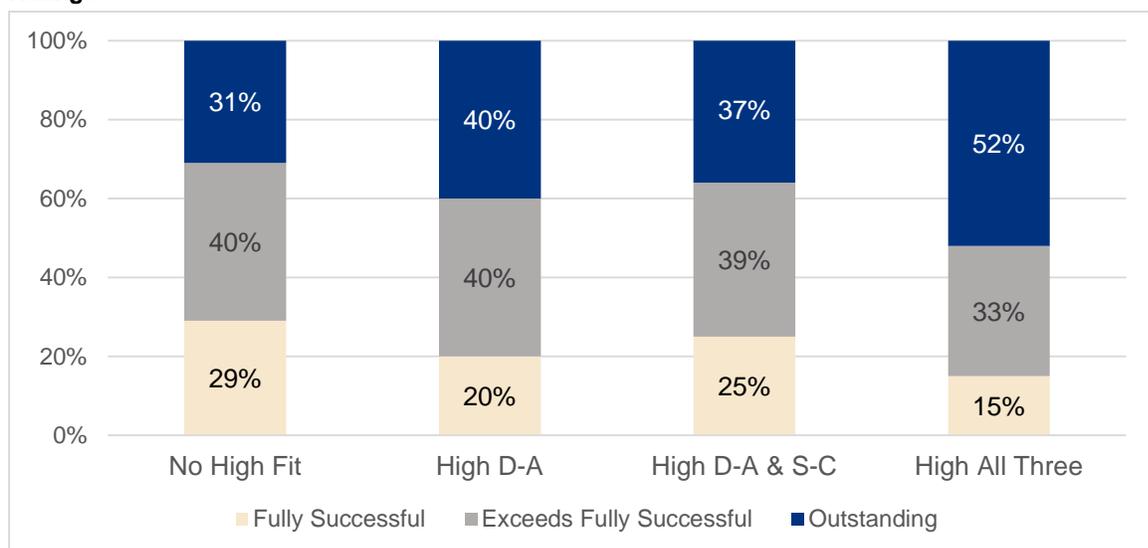
**Figure 6. Relationship Between Hierarchical Job Fit and Employee Engagement**



**Job Performance**

We would expect employees with higher levels of job fit to perform better on the job and, therefore, to receive better performance appraisal ratings. After all, who would be expected to perform better on the job: an individual who lacks the ability to do the job (low demand-abilities fit) or an individual who has the ability to do the job (high demand-abilities fit)? Obviously, the higher the demand-abilities fit, the better the expected job performance. We see this expectation realized in Figure 7. The top rating (Outstanding) was reported by a greater percentage of respondents with high demand-abilities fit—whether considered alone or combined with other job fit components—than those who exhibited no high job fit. Although the additive quality of high self-concept job fit and high demand-abilities job fit seems less pronounced with performance appraisal than with some of our other findings, a higher percentage of respondents with high job fit in all three components said they received an Outstanding rating (52 percent) than individuals with either just high demand-abilities fit (40 percent) or individuals with high demand-abilities fit and high self-concept fit (37 percent).

**Figure 7. Relationship Between Hierarchical Job Fit and Self-Reported Performance Appraisal Ratings<sup>30</sup>**

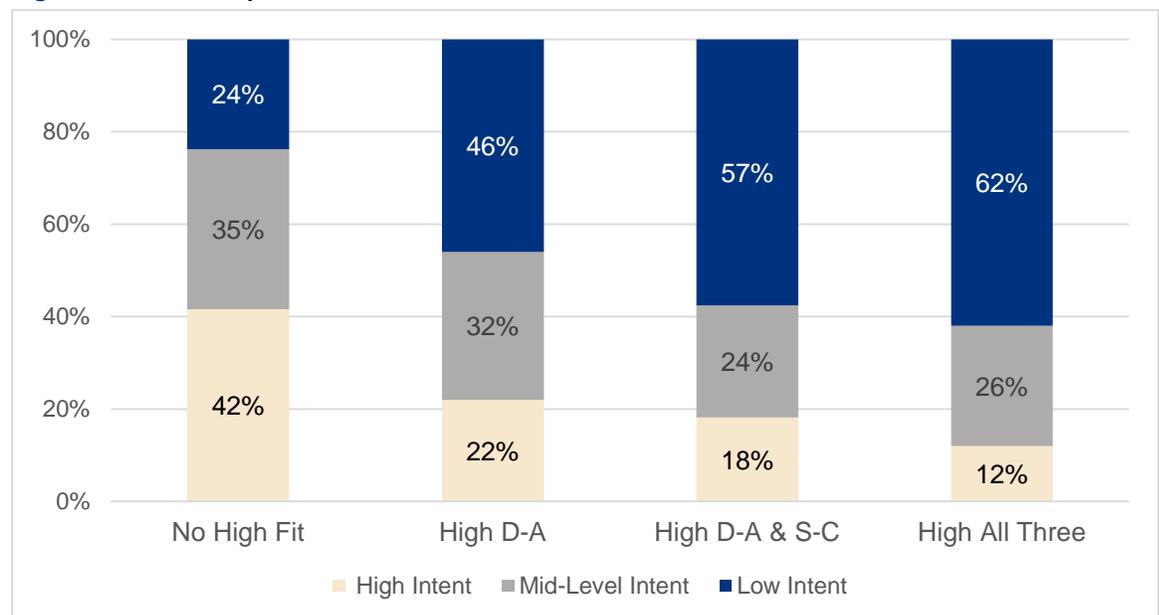


We provide two cautions about the data shown in Figure 7. First, a *rating* of job performance is not necessarily the same as *actual* job performance. Second, the ratings shown are self-reported. This could, in some cases, result in erroneous data either due to faulty memory or a desire to inflate one's actual rating. The percentage of respondents who said they received a rating below Fully Successful was too low to report (less than one percent). That is consistent with observed appraisal rating patterns in Federal agencies, even without the complications of self-reporting.

### *Intention to Leave*

Figure 8 presents MPS 2016 respondents' intent to leave their occupation, organization, or agency during the next 2 years by different hierarchical job fit type. Once again we see that respondents who exhibited more types of high job fit had less intention to leave than did those respondents with no, or fewer types of, high job fit. For example, only 12 percent of respondents with high job fit in all three components had a high intent to leave while 42 percent of respondents with no high job fit had a high intent to leave. The limitation with intent to leave data is that the data concern intentions—we have no information on whether anyone who reported that they intended to leave actually did leave. Merely wanting to leave the organization, however, could certainly affect one's work attitudes and performance.

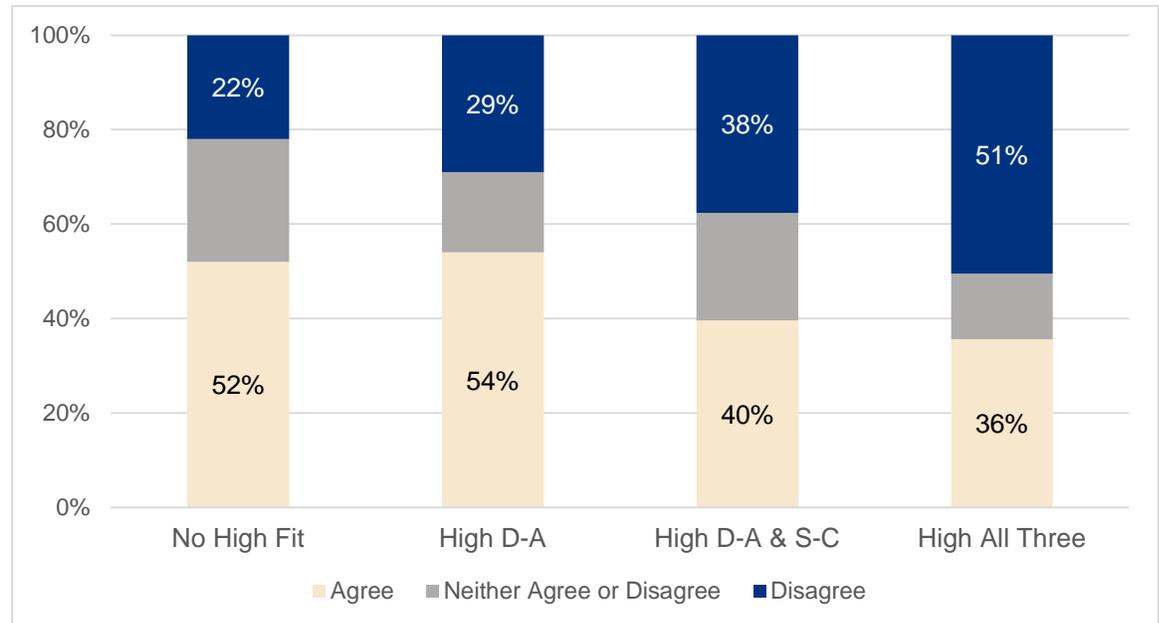
**Figure 8. Relationship Between Hierarchical Job Fit and Intent to Leave<sup>31</sup>**



Leaving due to retirement is different than leaving for a different occupation, organization, or agency. Individuals who are eligible to retire have worked long careers and may be ready to retire—and they have earned it. What Figure 9 shows, however, is that the decision to retire, like the decision to leave, is still related to job fit. Fewer respondents who have high job fit agreed that they will be retiring compared to those with low job fit. For example, 54 percent of respondents with only high demand-abilities fit agreed they would be retiring; 40 percent of respondents with high demand-abilities and high self-concept fit agreed they would be retiring; and only 36 percent of respondents with high job fit in all three components agreed they would be retiring.

It appears that respondents who are eligible to retire but plan to remain have high levels of job fit that may be a factor in keeping them on the job. This is a particularly timely finding given that the Federal Government continues to face a large number of retirements.<sup>32</sup> Organizations that sustain high levels of job fit will likely have more success at retaining their older, more experienced employees longer than organizations that do not.

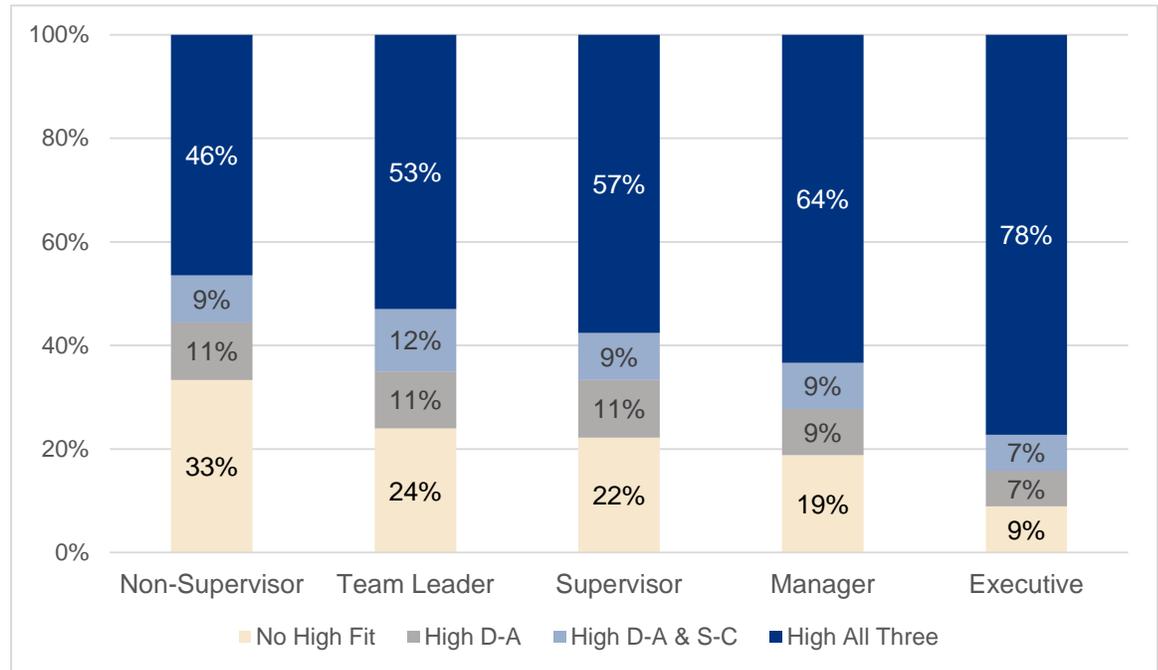
**Figure 9. Relationship Between Hierarchical Job Fit and “Do You Plan to Retire?”<sup>33</sup>**



**Organizational Responsibility**

Figure 10 contrasts the differing levels of high job fit among MPS 2016 respondents based on their organizational responsibility. As the employee’s responsibility level increases we see higher levels of high job fit. One-third of non-supervisory employees exhibited no high job fit, while only nine percent of executives exhibited no high job fit. This clear pattern could be due to several factors. For example, as employees progress up their organization’s ladder of responsibility, they may have more ability and leeway to mold their own jobs into something that will better fit their professional needs or goals. On the other hand, perhaps non-supervisors who start off with high levels of job fit are more frequently selected for supervisory positions, and so on.

As noted with the discussion of Figure 2, we propose that achieving high levels of demand-abilities fit may be a bit easier or more straightforward than achieving the other two types of high job fit. Figure 10 reinforces this point as two-thirds of non-supervisory employees, for example, possessed high demand-abilities fit while one-third did not.

**Figure 10. Relationship Between Hierarchical Job Fit and Organizational Responsibility**

An interesting finding shown in Figure 10 is the relatively consistent level of certain job fit components across jobs with varying degrees of organizational responsibility. The percentage of respondents who exhibited only high demand-abilities fit and the percentage of respondents who exhibited both high demand-abilities fit *and* high self-concept fit remained nearly uniform regardless of their position. What this may tell us is that there is a stable portion of the workforce that has not achieved high fit in all three components. These individuals possess the ability to perform their jobs and they even equate who they are as a person with their jobs, yet their jobs do not routinely give them the opportunity to do things they find interesting or are passionate about.

### *How to Improve Job Fit*

MSPB has released many publications designed to improve the management and operation of the Federal civil service. This section presents actions, excerpted from those publications, that could help improve Federal employee job fit, including improving job design, hiring, employee training and development, and performance management. These actions are summarized in Figure 11. We note that such improvements may require efforts from multiple levels of the organization, from line employees to agency leaders.

**Figure 11. Summary of Actions that May Improve Job Fit**

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Agencies/Supervisors</b>	<b>Employees</b>
Job Design	Include autonomy, skill and task variety, the ability to complete whole pieces of work, responsibility, and accountability in jobs after a thorough job analysis resulting in current and accurate position descriptions.	
Hiring - Vacancy Announcements	Provide sufficient insight into the job and willingness to be honest about what the job is and what the job is not to help prospective applicants determine if the job would be a good fit for them.	Make informed decisions about vacant jobs—is the job one that will fit you in various important ways?
Hiring - Applicant Assessment	Use a combination of assessments that help make valid distinctions among applicants, provide a comprehensive evaluation of applicant abilities and fit, and give a realistic job preview where practical.	
Hiring - Probationary Period	Use the probationary period as it was intended—as the final assessment to determine if the new employee will be successful in the position or should be separated.	
Employee Training and Development	Know what skills and competencies are amenable to development—and hire for and provide training accordingly. Also, invest in the development of employees while using different strategies to improve employee skills versus transforming a function or segment of the workforce.	Be proactive to determine ways to enhance your strengths, overcome problem areas, and develop new skills.
Performance Management	Use the process to improve performance versus merely completing the required tasks. Address job tasks and skills but also think beyond them by providing line-of-sight to the larger mission to foster fit beyond just D-A. Seek feedback, ask employees about issues of fit, and encourage active employee involvement in the performance management process.	Participate actively in the process by adopting a continuous learning mindset and develop and carry out a plan (in concert with your supervisor) to improve your skills and performance.

### *Job Design*

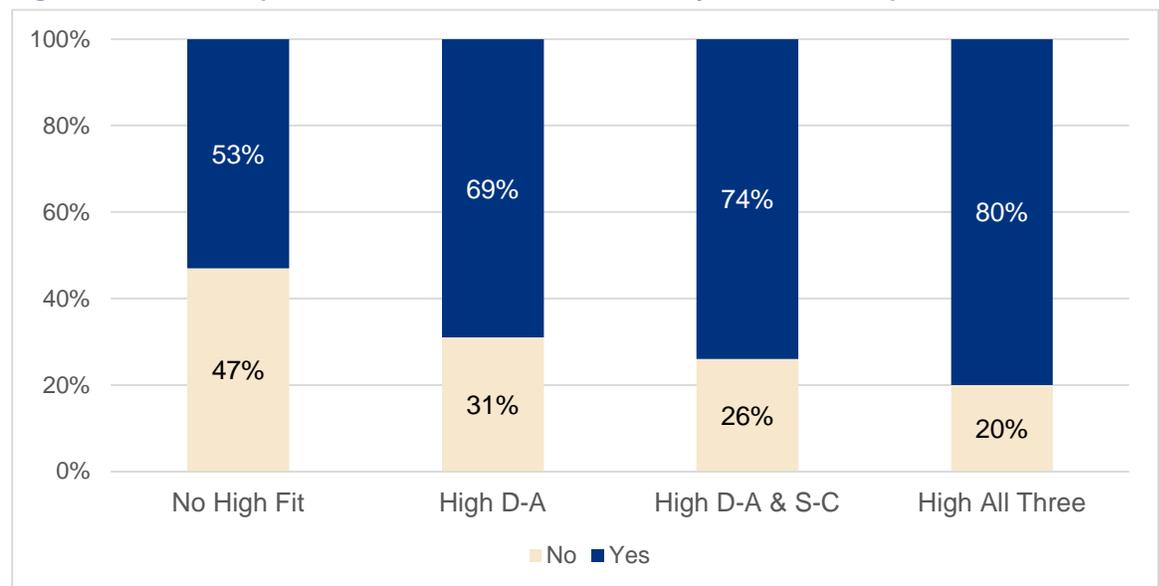
Previous MSPB research found that good job design—structuring jobs to maximize desirable characteristics—supports organizational efficiency and effectiveness. This is because job characteristics can influence employee motivation, a necessary ingredient for higher levels of employee engagement. Good job design may also influence at least needs-supplies job fit as organizations have the opportunity to include characteristics such as autonomy, skill and task variety, the ability to complete whole pieces of work or projects, responsibility, and accountability.<sup>34</sup>

Position descriptions—documents that describe the key duties, responsibilities and requirements of Federal jobs—are the basis of good job design. They are also the foundation of a number of important human resources documents and processes such as vacancy announcements, training

needs assessment, and performance management.<sup>35</sup> When we think about job fit, we also have to think about position descriptions. After all, what is a major aspect against which we are measuring the employee's fit? The job. And what should tell the employee exactly what the job is? The position description. It would follow then that it would be difficult to fit a job where the position description is incorrect or outdated. How can one even know if one has the ability to perform a job if one is not sure exactly what the job is?

As shown in Figure 12, this logic is borne out by our MPS 2016 survey data regarding job fit and employee perceptions of the accuracy of their position descriptions. As with other findings in this research brief, the higher the job fit our survey respondents exhibited, the more they agreed that their position descriptions are accurate. One might argue, however, that because only about two-thirds (69 percent) and three-quarters (74 percent) of respondents with some high job fit said their position descriptions are accurate, there is still some work to do.

**Figure 12. Relationship Between Hierarchical Job Fit and “My Position Description is Accurate”<sup>36</sup>**



## Hiring

There are a number of steps hiring officials, human resources staff, and even job applicants can take during the hiring process to encourage a good fit between the selected individual and the vacant job. Our previous research has touched on three such areas: vacancy announcements, applicant assessment, and the probationary period.

*Vacancy Announcements.* Vacancy announcements are a key piece to any recruiting strategy as they are the main, and often only, source that applicants have to make an informed decision about whether the open job would be a good fit for them. However, the way vacancy announcements are often written does not help the Government's recruiting efforts. Our previous research found that at least half of vacancy announcements are poorly written and that they make little or no attempt to sell the Government, the agency, or the position to be filled.<sup>37</sup> Since that time, the quality of vacancy announcements has received more attention from agencies and OPM has attempted to work with agencies to improve announcements. However, anecdotal information indicates that Federal job announcements are still a barrier to good hiring and fail to consistently convey the type of information applicants need to decide whether they would be a good fit for the open job.

One way to convey information that may help prospective applicants determine if the vacant job is a good fit for them is to explicitly describe what the successful applicant will and will *not* be doing on the job. Figure 13 gives examples from a past MSPB job announcement that attempted to do just that—by listing characteristics of people who might be a good fit for the position and of those who might not. Based on such information, applicants can make more informed decisions about whether they should apply for the job. Of course to do this, agencies need to have an accurate understanding of their jobs and the willingness to be candid about the advantages and disadvantages of the position.<sup>38</sup> This understanding can only be gained by conducting a thorough job analysis resulting in a current and accurate position description. These materials are also the foundation of effective applicant assessments which are critical to hiring an individual who will be successful in the position.

**Applicant Assessment.** The Federal Government has spent extensive time and resources trying to reform the overall competitive hiring process. However, not enough attention has been paid specifically to how agencies assess their applicants. Past MSPB research indicates that agencies often use assessment tools that are not the best predictors of future performance. In addition, recent hiring reforms have made it easier for applicants to apply, increasing the volume of applicants. MSPB has long recommended that agencies improve their applicant assessment processes and that Congress appropriate funding for Governmentwide assessments.<sup>39</sup> More rigorous applicant assessment can only improve the chances that the individual hired is a good fit for the vacant job. Among the assessments that MSPB has studied and reported on are: job simulations,<sup>40</sup> reference checks,<sup>41</sup> employment interviews,<sup>42</sup> and evaluating applicant training and experience.<sup>43</sup>

Our previous employee engagement research noted two specific strategies organizations can use to give applicants insight into what the job will entail so they can determine whether it would be a good fit for them. The first strategy is to involve current employees in the recruitment and assessment processes. That way, employees can explain what it is like to work in the organization and answer questions from job applicants about the work. This exchange of information between current employees and applicants helps both parties determine whether there is an appropriate fit based on the abilities and needs of the applicant compared to what the job has to offer. The second strategy is using a work sample assessment. That gives the applicant insight into what it is like to do the job they are applying for and gives the hiring organization a product they can assess.<sup>44</sup>

**The Probationary Period.** Perhaps the most important assessment is the probationary period. The probationary period can be a highly effective tool to evaluate a new hire's potential to be an asset

**Figure 13. Helping Applicants Gauge Job Fit**

*(Adapted from a Research Analyst job announcement)*

This job might be for you if:

- You like working on long-term projects that have a broad impact on Government operations.
- You enjoy taking the initiative to define and carry out your work projects.
- You enjoy looking at human resources issues from a broad perspective to identify how policies, rules, or regulations can be improved.

This job might NOT be for you if:

- You favor an environment where you can see the results of your work on a day-to-day basis.
- You prefer a certain level of job structure in which you receive direction on what needs to be done and how it should be done.
- You like to regularly consult with managers on their individual human resources issues to help them meet their immediate mission needs.

to the Government before an appointment becomes final. The probationary period is effective, however, only if agencies use it to assess their probationary employees and act upon those assessments. Our previous research on the probationary period found that agencies were too often unwilling to assess probationary employees, or to act upon an assessment, preventing the probationary period from being as effective as it should be.<sup>45</sup> An assessment lasting an extended period of time where supervisors can monitor probationers should give an indication of whether probationers at least possess the ability (demand-abilities fit) to perform the job. If not, active decisions need to be made if the probationers can be trained or mentored to an acceptable level or whether they should be separated.

### ***Employee Training and Development***

Formal training is an important part of developing employees so they can successfully perform their jobs. It is also central to establishing and maintaining demand-abilities job fit. Our previous research into this area has shown, however, that some competencies needed by Federal employees are more responsive to training than others. This is important for any discussion of job fit for two reasons. First, when filling vacant positions, organizations need to be aware that if some candidates lack certain kinds of competencies, the newly-hired employee may not be able to acquire them through training. Second, MSPB survey data show that a significant number of employees may either avoid training that would help them or seek training that might prove to be frustrating and unsuccessful because of misperceptions about the trainability of various competencies.<sup>46</sup> Both of these issues could limit employees' attaining demand-abilities job fit.

We note that short-term training alone might not be sufficient when an organization seeks to transform a function or segment of its workforce. An example of such a conversion is the ongoing effort to adapt Federal human resources offices and staff from a focus on transactional and processing work to one on consulting, strategy, and problem-solving. Such change may require extended and sophisticated training simply to achieve sufficient demand-abilities fit. Also such transformation can have far-reaching and lasting implications for needs-supply and self-concept fit. A job that primarily requires an employee to be an authoritative technical expert, independently applying professional judgment and providing the "right" or "best" answer, is much different from a job that requires engaging with clients to understand their needs, where success is gauged in terms of customer satisfaction and organizational outcomes. Even if those two jobs have many skills and competencies in common, they will *feel* much different, day to day. An individual who has the skills to do either job might nevertheless find one rewarding and the other frustrating. Considering the different types of job fit in this scenario can help organizations make better decisions about workforce planning and development, and help employees make better decisions about their own careers.

### ***Performance Management***

Semi-annual (or more frequent) reviews of employee performance should include assessments of each employee's strengths as well as what their development needs may be. Development opportunities should be explored for all employees, including both specific training needed for the current job and wider skill development. Skill delivery mechanisms range from free and low-cost development opportunities to formal training sessions.<sup>47</sup> Such reviews and assessments are critical for developing and maintaining demand-abilities job fit, and hopefully will reduce the number of employees who believe they are not given an opportunity to improve their skills (as shown in Figure 4).

Agency leadership should continually highlight the importance of the agency's mission—in employee orientation sessions and throughout the performance management process. Supervisors should use their agency's performance management processes to establish a clear line of sight from the employee and his or her role to the agency's mission and how it is fulfilled. A strong psychological tie to the organization or mission improves needs-supplies job fit. Employees forming a higher impression of themselves because they perceive a stronger link to the value their agency brings the American people elevates self-concept job fit. The benefit of clearly showing how employees personally contribute to the larger agency mission accrues to the individual, and ultimately, the organization.<sup>48</sup>

The employee performance management process is too-often viewed as something that happens to employees. Employees should, instead, take an active role in managing their own performance. If employees need more guidance, direction, or feedback than they are receiving, they should ask for it. Employees should reflect frequently on their own performance and consider how they can improve it. High levels of demand-ability job fit can be encouraged by employees adopting a continuous learning mindset. Employees should work with their supervisors to create and implement a focused development plan with clear objectives that include both enhancing strengths and overcoming problem areas.<sup>49</sup> Supervisors and agency leadership need to create an environment where employees feel they are encouraged to undertake these activities.

Previous MSPB research has also shown that positive aspects of the performance management process and good job design are most powerful and beneficial in combination. By providing feedback that is timely and constructive, offering the right degree of autonomy, and helping employees to see the meaning in their work, supervisors and managers can increase the potential that employees will engage in desirable performance behaviors.<sup>50</sup> Such behaviors can also improve the chances that employees will exhibit high fit across the three components of job fit we have discussed.

### *In Closing*

This brief discussed three different components of job fit and why they are important. Federal employees who perceive they have high job fit in one, two, or three of the components exhibit greater job satisfaction, higher levels of employee engagement, and less intention to leave. These employees also report receiving better performance appraisal ratings. Supervisors and human resources staff should evaluate and improve practices in areas such as job design, hiring, employee training and development, and performance management to improve the chances that agency workforces will have higher job fit. Employees should be inquisitive job-seekers and active participants in the performance management process to improve the chances that their job will be a good fit with their abilities and match what they need from the job.

## Appendix—Methodology

For the past three decades, MSPB has conducted periodic Governmentwide Merit Principles Surveys (MPS) of Federal employees to solicit their perceptions of their jobs, work environments, supervisors, and agencies. The scales that we developed to measure perceptions of the different components of job fit among Federal employees are derived from items on our most recent MPS, the MPS 2016. To reduce the demands on survey respondents, the MPS 2016 was divided into three paths so that all respondents would only be asked a fraction of the total number of questions. The data discussed in this paper comes from “Path 2” of that survey. Overall, 37,397 civilian employees in 24 major Federal departments and independent agencies were invited to respond to Path 2 and 14,473 responded, for a response rate of 39 percent.<sup>51</sup>

A widely used measure of scale internal consistency reliability is Cronbach’s coefficient alpha ( $\alpha$ ). Alpha ranges from 0 to 1 and measures the degree to which the items in a scale measure the same underlying sentiment or characteristic with stronger consistency among the items represented by higher coefficient  $\alpha$  levels.<sup>52</sup> Coefficient  $\alpha$  for each of our scales is listed below. There is strong evidence that the survey questions we used for each scale for the different components of job fit are measuring the same construct.<sup>53</sup> The items that comprise each scale are listed below. These items approximate those previously researched and validated scales that researchers have used to measure the different components of job fit.<sup>54</sup>

Each item had a five-level response pattern: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree. To determine whether a survey respondent had high, moderate, or low job fit we assigned a point value ranging from one to five to each of the possible responses with Strongly Disagree equating to a value of one, and Strongly Agree equating to a value of five. We considered a respondent to have high job fit if they achieved a score equivalent to agreeing with each of the scale questions. For example, the demand-abilities scale is composed of four items. A response of Agree was given a value of four. Agreement on all 4 items would equal a score of 16, thereby creating the threshold for high demand-abilities fit. We considered a respondent to have low job fit if they scored less than neutral on the scale items. For example, the demand-abilities scale is comprised of four items. A response of Neither Agree nor Disagree was given a value of three. Responding neutral to all 4 items would equal 12, below which score was considered low demand-abilities fit. Thresholds for each scale are listed below as are the number of MPS 2016 respondents included in the analysis of each separate job fit component—those respondents who answered each question in the respective scale.

### *Demand-Abilities*

- My work is a good fit for my capabilities.
- I like the amount of challenge and complexity in my work.
- I like the variety of tasks and responsibilities in my work.
- My work gives me a good opportunity to apply my talents and strengths.

Coefficient  $\alpha$  = 0.906

Number of MPS 2016 respondents: 13,592 (13,367 weighted)

Thresholds: High Demand-Abilities Fit: 16-20

Moderate Demand-Abilities Fit: 12-15

Low Demand-Abilities Fit: 11 and below

### *Needs-Supplies*

- My work gives me a good opportunity to do things I like to do.
- My work gives me a good opportunity to do things I find interesting.
- My work gives me a good opportunity to do things I am passionate about.

Coefficient  $\alpha = 0.936$

Number of MPS 2016 respondents: 13,576 (13,351 weighted)

Thresholds: High Needs-Supplies Fit:	12-15
Moderate Needs-Supplies Fit:	9-11
Low Needs-Supplies Fit:	8 and below

### *Self-Concept*

- My work is the kind of work I want to do.
- My work is a good fit for my personality.
- My work is consistent with my core values and beliefs.
- My work is a good fit for who I am.
- My work is consistent with my personal sense of purpose or calling.

Coefficient  $\alpha = 0.928$

Number of MPS 2016 respondents: 13,445 (13,227 weighted)

Thresholds: High Self-Concept Fit:	20-25
Moderate Self-Concept Fit:	15-19
Low Self-Concept Fit:	14 and below

The MPS 2016 sampling plan required oversampling (surveying a higher proportion of the population) of some groups to provide statistically reliable results. Accordingly, MSPB calculated response weights to produce results that are representative of Governmentwide employee opinions. All survey results in this report are weighted.

For ease of presentation, Strongly Agree and Agree responses were combined as were Strongly Disagree and Disagree responses. In analyzing survey results, Don't Know/Not Applicable responses were excluded to focus on those who reported an opinion in response to each survey question. Unless otherwise noted, percentages not adding up to 100 can be attributed to rounding.

### *Hierarchical Approach to Presentation of Data*

The level and type of job fit that employees possess does not occur in a vacuum. Comparing employees who possess high demand-abilities fit (for example) based solely on that characteristic would not be sensible. We would expect an individual who only exhibited high demand-abilities fit to be quite different from an individual who exhibited high demand-abilities fit along with high fit in the remaining two job fit components. For this reason, most of the survey data presented in this brief was presented based on the following groupings or hierarchy:

- First, those who did not display high job fit in any area;
- Second, those who displayed only high demand-abilities fit;
- Third, those who displayed high demand-abilities fit *and* high self-concept fit; and
- Finally, those who displayed high fit in all three areas.

Although survey respondents displayed the gamut of fit in all three components (low to moderate to high) we focused our analysis on high job fit for ease of presentation of survey results and to highlight best practices. On the MPS 2016, 13,371 respondents (13,146 weighted) answered each of the 12 questions that comprise the 3 job fit scales, and they were thus included in our hierarchical analysis. This hierarchical model encompassed 88 percent of those respondents. The remaining 12 percent did not fit into one of the 4 groups listed above. For reference, Figure 14 shows the type of high job fit possessed by the remaining 12 percent of those respondents that fell outside of our hierarchy.

**Figure 14. Other Types of High Job Fit Possessed by MPS 2016 Respondents**

Type of High Job Fit	Percentage of Respondents
High Needs-Supplies Only	2.2%
High Self-Concept Only	3.5%
High Demand-Abilities and High Needs-Supplies	3.6%
High Needs-Supplies and High Self-Concept	2.7%

## Appendix—End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, [The Power of Federal Employee Engagement](#) (September 2008), 40.
- <sup>2</sup> 5 U.S.C. § 1204(a)(3).
- <sup>3</sup> 5 U.S.C. § 2301(b)(5) and (7).
- <sup>4</sup> Daniel M. Cable and D. Scott DeRue, “The Convergent and Discriminant Validity of Subjective Fit Perceptions,” *Journal of Applied Psychology* 87, no. 5 (2002): 875.
- <sup>5</sup> Wesley A. Scroggins and Philip G. Benson, “Self-Concept-Job Fit,” in *Refining Familiar Constructs—Alternative Views in OB, HR, and I/O*, ed. Daniel J. Svyantek and Elizabeth McChrystal (Charlotte: Information Age Publishing, Inc., 2007), 212.
- <sup>6</sup> For more information on the different types of job fit see, for example, (a) Cable and DeRue, “The Convergent and Discriminant Validity of Subjective Fit Perceptions,” 881; (b) Wesley A. Scroggins, “An Examination of the Additive Versus Convergent Effects of Employee Perceptions of Fit,” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 37, no. 7 (2007): 1650-1651; and (c) Wesley A. Scroggins, “Antecedents and Outcomes of Experienced Meaningful Work: A Person-Job Fit Perspective,” *The Journal of Business Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (2008): 77.
- <sup>7</sup> Cable and DeRue, “The Convergent and Discriminant Validity of Subjective Fit Perceptions,” 875.
- <sup>8</sup> Scroggins, “An Examination of the Additive Versus Convergent Effects of Employee Perceptions of Fit,” 1651.
- <sup>9</sup> Corine Boon and Michal Biron, “Temporal issues in person-organization fit, person-job fit and turnover: The role of leader-member exchange,” *Human Relations* 69, no. 12 (2016): 2181.
- <sup>10</sup> Scroggins and Benson, “Self-Concept-Job Fit,” 216.
- <sup>11</sup> *Id.*
- <sup>12</sup> *Id.*, 217.
- <sup>13</sup> *Id.*, 218. The example here is adapted from this source.
- <sup>14</sup> See, for example, Cable and DeRue, “The Convergent and Discriminant Validity of Subjective Fit Perceptions,” 881, finding no significant relationship between perceived demand-abilities fit and occupational commitment, future job performance, or future raises.
- <sup>15</sup> Daniel M. Cable and Timothy A. Judge, “Person-Organization Fit, Job Choice Decisions, and Organizational Entry,” *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 67, no. 3 (September 1996): 306.
- <sup>16</sup> Jeffrey R. Edwards, “An Examination of Competing Versions of the Person-Environment Fit Approach to Stress,” *Academy of Management Journal* 39, no. 2 (1996): 335.
- <sup>17</sup> Cable and DeRue, “The Convergent and Discriminant Validity of Subjective Fit Perceptions,” 881.
- <sup>18</sup> Scroggins, “An Examination of the Additive Versus Convergent Effects of Employee Perceptions of Fit,” 1649.
- <sup>19</sup> *Id.*, 1650.
- <sup>20</sup> See, for example, *The Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey Governmentwide Management Reports* for the years [2017](#) 6, [2018](#) 5, and [2019](#) 3.
- <sup>21</sup> In response to the MPS 2005, for example, 95 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that “My agency’s mission is important to me.” U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, [Accomplishing Our Mission: Results of the Merit Principles Survey 2005](#) (February, 2007), 6.
- <sup>22</sup> For more information on the MPS 2010, see U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, [Federal Employee Engagement—The Motivating Potential of Job Characteristics and Rewards](#) (December 2012), 41-67.
- <sup>23</sup> For more information on the Federal human resources workforce, see U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, [The State of the Federal HR Workforce: Changes and Challenges](#) (May 2020).
- <sup>24</sup> Based on the MPS 2016 item “I am given a real opportunity to improve my skills in my organization.”
- <sup>25</sup> For more information on the job fit hierarchy, see the Appendix—Methodology.
- <sup>26</sup> Briken Aziri, “Job Satisfaction: A Literature Review,” *Management Research and Practice* 3, no. 4 (2011): 85.
- <sup>27</sup> Based on the MPS 2016 item “Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your job?”
- <sup>28</sup> MSPB, [The Power of Federal Employee Engagement](#).
- <sup>29</sup> *Id.*, 40-41.
- <sup>30</sup> Based on MPS 2016 respondents under performance appraisal systems that include all of the following rating options: “Fully Successful,” “Exceeds Fully Successful,” and “Outstanding.”

- <sup>31</sup> Based on the MPS 2016 items: “During the next two years do you plan to (a) Move to a different occupation or line of work?,” “(b) Move to a different organization within your current agency?,” and “(c) Move to a different agency within the Federal Government?”
- <sup>32</sup> See, for example, results of OPM’s 2019 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey where 25.6 percent of respondents said they planned to retire within the next 5 years. [Report on Demographic Questions by Agency](#), 3.
- <sup>33</sup> Among MPS 2016 respondents who are retirement-eligible within the next two years and plan to “leave the Federal Government (e.g., retire or resign)” within the next two years.
- <sup>34</sup> MSPB, [Federal Employee Engagement—The Motivating Potential of Job Characteristics and Rewards](#), iv.
- <sup>35</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, “Are Federal Employee Position Descriptions Accurate? (And Why We Should Care),” [Issues of Merit](#), May, 2019, 7.
- <sup>36</sup> Based on the MPS 2016 item: “My position description is an accurate reflection of my current job duties.”
- <sup>37</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, [Help Wanted: A Review of Federal Vacancy Announcements](#) (April 2003).
- <sup>38</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, “The New Importance of Job Announcements,” [Issues of Merit](#), September 2010, 7.
- <sup>39</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, [Improving Federal Hiring through Better Assessment](#) (July 2018).
- <sup>40</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, [Job Simulations: Trying Out For A Federal Job](#) (September 2009).
- <sup>41</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, [Reference Checking in Federal Hiring: Making the Call](#) (September 2005).
- <sup>42</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, [The Federal Selection Interview: Unrealized Potential](#) (February 2003).
- <sup>43</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, [Evaluating Job Applicants: The Role of Training and Experience in Hiring](#) (January 2014).
- <sup>44</sup> MSPB, [The Power of Federal Employee Engagement](#), 40-41.
- <sup>45</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, [The Probationary Period: A Critical Assessment Opportunity](#) (August, 2005).
- <sup>46</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, [Making the Right Connections—Targeting the Best Competencies for Training](#) (February 2011). MSPB’s taxonomy includes Knowledge competencies, which are highly trainable; Language, Social, and Reasoning competencies, which are moderately trainable; and Motivation and Mental Style competencies, which are less trainable.
- <sup>47</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, [Managing for Engagement—Communication, Connection, and Courage](#) (July 2009), v.
- <sup>48</sup> MSPB, [The Power of Federal Employee Engagement](#), 42.
- <sup>49</sup> MSPB, [Managing for Engagement—Communication, Connection, and Courage](#), iv.
- <sup>50</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, [The Roles of Feedback, Autonomy, and Meaningfulness in Employee Performance Behaviors](#) (August 2018), 9.
- <sup>51</sup> A public use dataset version of the MPS 2016 is available in MSPB’s [FOIA e-Reading Room](#).
- <sup>52</sup> Mohsen Tavakol and Reg Dennick, “Making sense of Cronbach’s alpha,” *International Journal of Medical Education* 2, (2011): 53-55.
- <sup>53</sup> For more information about coefficient  $\alpha$ , see J.C. Nunnally, *Psychometric Theory* (2nd ed.) (New York: McGraw Hill, 1978), 245.
- <sup>54</sup> See, for example, (a) Scroggins, “An Examination of the Additive Versus Convergent Effects of Employee Perceptions of Fit,” 1655-1656; (b) Cable and Judge, “Person-Organization Fit, Job Choice Decisions, and Organizational Entry,” 299; and (c) Cable and DeRue, “The Convergent and Discriminant Validity of Subjective Fit Perceptions,” 879.