

The Federal Government: A Model Employer or a Work In Progress?

Perspectives from 25 Years of the Merit Principles Survey



A Report to the President and the Congress of the United States
by the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board

THE CHAIRMAN



U.S. MERIT SYSTEMS PROTECTION BOARD

1615 M Street, NW
Washington, DC 20419-0001

September 2008

The President
President of the Senate
Speaker of the House of Representatives

Dear Sirs and Madam:

In accordance with the requirements of 5 U.S.C. 1204(a)(3), it is my honor to submit this Merit Systems Protection Board report, "The Federal Government: A Model Employer or a Work In Progress?" The report examines the Federal Government's progress toward becoming a model employer using data from MSPB's Merit Principles Survey, a survey of Federal employees that MSPB has conducted periodically since 1983.

This report explores patterns and trends in Federal employees' opinions about their jobs, agencies, and working conditions. We found many positive developments. For example, Federal employees' satisfaction with their pay has increased significantly. The percentage of employees who reported experiencing discrimination or retaliation has declined.

However, we also found areas where improvement is needed. Federal employees consistently reported that their supervisors' technical skills outpaced their managerial skills. Accordingly, employees expressed little confidence in the ability of Federal supervisors to exercise personnel authorities fairly and effectively. Also, although differences in Federal employee opinion across lines of ethnicity and race have diminished, minority employees remained more likely to report experiencing unfair treatment or discrimination in the workplace.

Fortunately, survey results confirm that agencies can make a difference. Employee opinions generally varied more across agencies than across lines of ethnicity and race, gender, and age, reinforcing the importance of leadership, organizational culture, and human resources policy and practice within Federal agencies.

The insights in this report should help Federal agencies build on their strengths and focus attention on areas for improvement such as employee utilization, the selection and development of Federal supervisors, and performance management. I believe you will find this report useful as you consider these and other issues regarding the future of the Federal civil service.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Neil A. G. McPhie".

Neil A. G. McPhie

Enclosure

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Executive Summary

The U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) has periodically conducted a Governmentwide Merit Principles Survey (MPS) since 1983. The MPS has two primary purposes: (1) to ask a core set of questions on topics such as employee satisfaction, adherence to the merit principles, and avoidance of prohibited personnel practices and (2) to collect data in support of current or planned research. The MPS has been administered eight times, providing a wealth of data on Federal employee opinions of Federal employment and the management of the Federal workforce. The data provide both a historical perspective, showing how opinions change over time and are influenced by short- and long-term developments, and a cross-sectional perspective, showing how opinions vary along lines such as agency, ethnicity and race, and gender. These perspectives can provide Federal leaders, from agency heads to first-line supervisors, with a clearer sense of how well the Federal workforce is managed and utilized, and help them identify ways to improve human capital policies and practices.

Our results showed that Federal employees are satisfied with most aspects of the Federal work environment and reflected improvement in many aspects of Federal employment. This indicates that efforts to improve personnel practices and the Federal “employment deal” can, given sufficient resources and sustained effort, make a material difference in employees’ work lives and consequently should enhance both organizational performance and the Federal Government’s ability to recruit and retain employees. Nevertheless, progress has not been universal. On some topics, such as the perceived management skills of Federal supervisors, employee opinions have changed little. Also, significant differences persist across agencies and across lines of ethnicity and race in many areas, including employee job satisfaction, adequacy of resources and training, and perceptions of fair treatment and discrimination. Such results may point to a need for local change (such as improved communication between supervisors and employees), for more focused management attention to challenges (such as improving performance measurement and management), or for interagency or Governmentwide initiatives to address broad policy issues.

Findings

The Federal Government’s employment deal has become much more

attractive. The past 25 years have seen marked improvement in how Federal employees view the Federal Government’s “employment deal.” For example, 76 percent of Federal employees indicated that they would recommend the Government as a place to work in 2005, up from 49 percent in 1989.¹ One important contributor to this positive change is the increased attractiveness of Federal pay and benefits. In 2005, 60 percent of Federal employees reported that

¹ Since we did not ask every question on every MPS and we sometimes altered the response scale which prevented direct comparison, we report results for the most recent year that the comparison item and scale were included. Therefore, if we report data from 2005, that means the comparison item and/or the response scale was not on the 2007 MPS.

they were satisfied with their pay, compared to only 28 percent in 1989. That suggests that efforts to make Federal pay more competitive have made a measurable difference although it does not mean that Federal pay is necessarily competitive in all occupations and locations. Nevertheless, Federal agencies appear to be better positioned to compete for talent than in the past—which is reassuring in light of the anticipated retirement of many long-time Federal employees.

The Federal Government sometimes fails to make optimal use of its employees. The Federal Government’s progress in becoming a more attractive employer has not been matched by its progress in becoming a better manager of people. Gains in pay satisfaction and willingness to recommend Federal employment have not been matched by gains in the areas of job satisfaction, skills utilization, or adequacy of training and resources.

That is unsettling, for two reasons. First, meaningful and fulfilling work should be a hallmark of Federal employment. In 2005, employees overwhelmingly agreed (91 percent) that their work is important—yet barely two-thirds (68 percent) agreed that their job makes good use of their skills and abilities. Second, the Federal workforce is increasingly composed of “knowledge workers”—employees who achieve results through expertise, judgment, and innovation. Yet it appears that, from an employee perspective, expertise is frequently underutilized or underdeveloped. Only a bare majority of employees (54 percent) believed that their work opinions count, and many employees reported that they lack the resources needed to succeed, or that they did not receive the training needed to maintain or sharpen their essential skills.

Agencies hold the keys to job satisfaction and productivity. Survey results confirm that agency and organizational culture matter. On most survey items, responses varied much more by agency than by categories such as ethnicity and race, gender, supervisory status, or pay level. Moreover, examination of survey results over time shows that agency and leadership attention to the work environment and to human resources practices can make a positive difference. Survey results also offer two cautions. First, good intentions and good policies are not sufficient. Progress will be slow or nonexistent in the absence of sustained leadership commitment. For example, all agencies acknowledge the importance of training. However, in two major agencies, the percentage of employees reporting that they received sufficient training declined between 1992 and 2005. Second, progress—especially in areas related to trust and organizational culture—may be hard-won but can be easily lost.

Effective supervision is critical, but remains elusive. Supervisors are critical to both productivity and morale, as they are responsible for sharing information, promoting teamwork, assigning work, requesting and allocating resources, providing feedback and recognition, resolving disputes, and evaluating performance. Survey results confirm the importance of effective supervision: employee satisfaction with supervisors is influenced more by the supervisor’s management ability than by his or her technical competence. The need for good supervisory skills is heightened by personnel reforms that give managers greater discretion and that emphasize performance (which is both influenced and evaluated by supervisors) over tenure

as a basis for personnel decisions. However, employee opinions of supervisors' management ability have improved only marginally since 1986.

Fewer employees report experiencing discrimination or other prohibited personnel practices. Survey results indicate that the Federal Government has made great progress toward achieving a workplace that is free of prohibited personnel practices. The percentages of employees who report discrimination on bases such as ethnicity and race, sex,² age, and religion have declined. The reported incidence of retaliation for activities such as whistleblowing has also declined. Additionally, with few exceptions, men and women hold similar opinions of their jobs, agencies, and treatment, suggesting that progress has been made in eliminating sex-based discrimination and stereotypes.

The Federal Government, which has long aimed to be a “model employer,” has not yet fully achieved that vision. Although increasing percentages of employees believe that they are treated fairly in the workplace, employees continue to express reservations about how agencies fill vacancies and allocate awards. Similarly, employee trust in supervisors to make fair and wise personnel decisions is guarded, although greater than in the past. Moreover, survey results show a continuing and often substantial gap between minority and nonminority employees' perceptions of the fairness of personnel policies and decisions, and the prevalence of discrimination and other prohibited personnel practices.

Recommendations

Federal agencies should:

Capitalize on their strengths as an employer. Federal agencies have notable strengths for attracting employees, including the ability to offer meaningful work and a public commitment to the fair treatment of employees. Survey results indicate that agencies may also have some strengths that have been overlooked, such as the ability to offer competitive pay and benefits to employees in many occupations and geographic locations. Agencies should emphasize the many positive aspects of the Federal employment deal when recruiting, whether through vacancy announcements, advertisements, word-of-mouth, or other methods.

Make the fullest possible use of their employees. Federal employees believe that their work and agencies' missions are important. However, survey results suggest that agencies should do more to make better use of their employees' commitment, skills and insights, and fulfill their responsibilities for employee development. In particular, agencies need to ensure that they (1) assign important, challenging work to their employees; (2) give employees the leadership, training, and resources needed to succeed; and (3) strengthen employee performance management, especially in the areas of evaluation and feedback, recognition of excellence, and addressing poor performance.

² In this report, we generally use the term “gender,” but our survey questions use the term “sex.”

Emphasize the importance of supervision and improve the selection and development of supervisors. Although supervisors are key to effective workforce management, Federal employees continue to report that supervisors' management abilities are inferior to their technical competence. That persistent gap suggests that agencies need to examine both what they expect of their supervisors, and how they select, develop, and evaluate their supervisors. If agencies are to make the most effective use of their employees, then agencies must (1) define supervisors' roles to emphasize supervisory functions over technical and staff functions; (2) select supervisors based on supervisory ability, in addition to technical accomplishments; (3) identify and develop essential supervisory competencies; and (4) give due weight to supervisory effectiveness in the evaluation and recognition of supervisors.

Remain vigilant against prohibited personnel practices, discrimination, and practices that undermine the actual or perceived integrity of human resources programs. Survey results indicate that fewer employees than in the past experience discrimination or prohibited personnel practices in the workplace. To sustain progress, Federal agencies should seek to further reduce the incidence of illegal behaviors through education, appropriate redress mechanisms, and accountability for employees who abuse personnel authorities, commit prohibited personnel practices, or tolerate such actions. Agencies should also seek to reduce perceptions of discrimination or prohibited personnel practices, and to increase employee trust in human resources decisions and decision-makers, by promoting openness in personnel processes and decisions.

Obtain and use employee feedback on a recurring, systematic basis. Agencies should use employee feedback to gain insights into agency operations, culture, and morale. Agencies should then translate those insights into actions, such as improvements in leadership, resource management, communication, human resources policy, and work processes, to improve employee productivity and commitment.

Introduction

As the guardian of the merit systems under which Federal employees work, the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) adjudicates appeals filed by Federal employees and conducts studies relating to Federal merit systems. Those functions are intended to ensure that the Federal workforce is managed in accordance with the merit principles (Title 5, U.S.C., Section 2301) and is free of prohibited personnel practices (Title 5, U.S.C., Section 2302). The Merit Principles Survey (MPS) is an important component of MSPB's research, yielding insight into employee attitudes on a variety of topics since 1983. Data from the survey have served as an indicator of agency adherence to merit principles and have been used to support MSPB recommendations on many aspects of Governmentwide and agency personnel policy and practice.

Why Conduct the Merit Principles Survey?

As an independent, bipartisan Federal agency, MSPB conducts research, submits the results to the President and the Congress, and shares the results with Federal agencies and other stakeholders. The MSPB's Governmentwide surveys, which elicit the opinions of Federal employees on a variety of topics, are an essential component of that research. Because the surveys are administered by the MSPB, and responses are confidential, the Merit Principles Survey provides a means for employees to express their opinions freely, without fear of disclosure or repercussions.

Another benefit of the MPS is the long-term, Governmentwide perspective that its data provide. Between 1983 and 2007, the MSPB has administered the MPS eight times. Over this period, the Merit Principles Survey has changed considerably, reflecting the need to cover timely research topics and improvements in the item pool. Although individual items have not necessarily been asked on every survey, a core set of items has been used repeatedly, permitting comparison over time.

Results from these core items provide an analysis of long-term trends and of short-term or local influences that affected employee opinions at the time of the survey. Such perspectives help leaders and policymakers better understand what influences changes in employee perceptions, enabling them to gauge the possible effects of initiatives and future events and to plan and act accordingly.

The MPS and the Merit Principles and Prohibited Personnel Practices

To provide insight into the health of Federal merit systems, every Merit Principles Survey since 1986 has included several items asking employees if they believe they have been treated in accordance with the merit principles and whether they have been subjected to prohibited personnel practices. Appendix A lists the merit principles and Appendix B lists the prohibited personnel practices.

Using Survey Results to Improve Organizational Effectiveness

Feedback obtained through surveys can help the Federal Government and constituent agencies identify issues of concern, such as staffing, training, performance management and recognition, job satisfaction, and employee perceptions of discrimination or unfair treatment. These issues can then be addressed at one or more levels. At the Governmentwide or agency level, policies, priorities, and budgets can be changed. At the organization and work unit level, managers and supervisors can use results to change human resources practices, examine work processes, or improve work relationships.

The feedback is also useful to policymakers and stakeholders who are not directly involved in the day-to-day management of the Government. Employee perspectives provide insights into how employees view their careers and their employer, and promote understanding of why the Government succeeds, or faces challenges, in areas such as recruitment, retention, and productivity.

Survey results also provide insight into Federal employee job satisfaction and morale, two concerns that are consequential for reasons beyond the Government's desire to be a model employer. For example, employees who find their work meaningful are more likely to be "engaged"—that is, personally invested in their work and in their organizations. Research has found that engagement is correlated with a variety of benefits to the organization, including higher performance, lower turnover among high-performing employees, and reduced sick leave usage and equal employment opportunity (EEO) complaint activity.³

High employee satisfaction has other benefits. For example, agencies can use reports of high employee satisfaction as a recruitment tool. One would rather work for an agency billed as one of the "Best Places to Work"⁴ as opposed to an agency at the bottom of the list. Employee opinions can also affect recruitment in less visible ways. Our research has shown that many new Federal employees first learned of their job through a friend or relative, often one currently employed with the organization.⁵ Thus, employee satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) can have consequences that extend beyond the immediate work unit. Employees' willingness to recommend the Federal Government or their agency as a place to work can directly affect an agency's recruitment efforts, the quality of the resulting applicant pool, and the acceptance of employment offers.

³ U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *Improving Agency Outcomes: The Power of Federal Employee Engagement*, Washington, DC, 2008.

⁴ Partnership for Public Service, <http://bestplacestowork.org/BPTW/about/>.

⁵ U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *Attracting the Next Generation: A Look at Federal Entry-Level Hires*, Washington, DC, January 2008, p. 21; and U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *In Search of Highly Skilled Workers: A Study on the Hiring of Upper Level Employees*, Washington, DC, February 2008, p. 27.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Presentation and Discussion of Results

Our discussion looks at trends; group differences across lines such as gender, ethnicity and race, supervisory status, and age; and differences among responses to one survey item compared to another at one point in time or across time. We organize our discussion into three sections:

- Influences on Federal employee opinions;
- Overall trends and patterns in Federal employee opinions; and
- Survey results by topic, with closer examination of noteworthy items and group differences.

In order to examine MPS results by topic area, we identified five topics based on the content of the survey items and statistical analysis of responses to survey items: (1) job satisfaction; (2) satisfaction with the supervisor; (3) compensation, recognition, and fair treatment; (4) discrimination; and (5) prohibited personnel practices.⁶ These topics and their associated survey items are listed in Appendix C. To permit comparison of group differences over time, we used the following five ethnicity and racial groups: American Indian, Asian/Pacific Islander, Black, Hispanic, and White.⁷

⁶ We used factor analysis to examine response patterns of longitudinal items that appeared in the 2005 Merit Principles Survey to appropriately group items together for purposes of discussion. A group of items formed a “factor” if opinions expressed on one item in the group predicted the opinions expressed on the other questions in that factor. That is, employees tended to answer items in similar ways within each factor, while (often) expressing distinctly different opinions on other factors. After grouping items into factors, we assigned a label to each factor based on the content of the items in that factor.

⁷ These categories are similar, but not identical, to those in current standards established by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). Although recent MSPB surveys comply with OMB standards, many of the surveys in this study predate the OMB standards. OMB standards distinguish Hispanic ethnicity from all racial categories and treat “Asian” and “Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander” as separate racial categories. For the OMB standards, see Office of Management and Budget, “Revisions to the Standards for the Classification of Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity; Notices,” 62 FR 58781-58790, October 20, 1997.

Identifying Noteworthy Results

The Merit Principles Survey is not administered to every Federal employee, because it is neither practical nor cost-effective to do so. Instead, we use a carefully designed sampling approach to select a representative sample of employees to provide a useful and reliable measure of employee opinion Governmentwide. However, some variability in responses is unavoidable; small changes in response patterns may occur as a result of different people responding to different administrations of the survey. As a general rule, therefore, we consider only shifts or differences between groups of more than 5 percentage points to be noteworthy.

Analyzing and Understanding Trends

Analyzing survey results over time reveals changes in employees' attitudes. The challenge is then to understand why these changes occurred. Usually, there are many plausible explanations, including external influences, changes in Government or agency human resources policy, changes in agency missions and environment, and shifts in employee demographics or attitudes. For example, employee opinions can be influenced by personal characteristics such as ethnicity and race, gender, and age, and by job characteristics such as occupation, salary level, and supervisory status. Thus, shifts in responses to survey items may reflect changes in the pool of respondents, rather than changes in the work environment.

Another challenge involves understanding when and how a particular development affects employee opinions. As examples, Government downsizing can affect responses at a single point in time, or over many years; a new pay system can affect different employees in different ways. To provide a context for the survey results and help readers better understand their possible implications, we precede our discussion of survey results with an overview of likely influences on Federal employee opinion, such as external events, changes in the Federal workforce, developments in Federal human resources policy, and personal characteristics.

Analyzing and Understanding Group Differences

A core value of the Federal Government is equitable treatment: basing personnel decisions on merit, without regard to characteristics such as gender, ethnicity and race, age, and religion. Accordingly, we examined survey results by gender, ethnicity and race, and other demographic variables to determine whether employees in different groups hold similar (or divergent) perceptions about their jobs and their treatment in the workplace. Group differences, however, can be difficult to interpret and potentially misleading. This is particularly true of differences among ethnicity and racial groups, because such differences may reflect, in whole or in part, differences on dimensions such as agency, occupation, or pay level. Readers should keep in mind the potential correlations that exist between these factors and other

demographic variables that make it difficult to know what each variable actually contributes to differences in opinion.

For example, in 2000 and 2005, American Indian respondents were less likely than other employees to agree with the statement that “Information is shared freely in my work unit.” Closer examination suggested that this information deficit may reflect differences in the work environment, rather than cultural differences or widespread practices that isolated or excluded American Indian employees. Because nearly half of American Indians who are Federal employees work in just two agencies, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Department of the Interior, a plausible explanation is that many American Indians are employed in agencies or jobs where information sharing may be a particular challenge. HHS’s Indian Health Service and Interior’s Bureau of Indian Affairs are geographically dispersed, with many employees working in remote locations. Moreover, in the Department of the Interior, there have been court-imposed restrictions on electronic communication in recent years.⁸

In summary, the differences in opinion among demographic groups that we present in the following sections of this report must be interpreted with caution. While ethnicity and race, age or another personal characteristic may be the most obvious attribute of the comparison groups, there may be other underlying causes of the differences in opinion that happen to correlate with a less readily apparent characteristic. For example, because race might correlate with occupational group, or age might correlate with pay level, interpretations of responses may be more difficult and complex than is immediately apparent.

⁸ Maria Streshinsky, “Back Online, Some Day,” *The Atlantic*, May 19, 2008, <http://thecurrent.theatlantic.com>.

Influences on Federal Employee Opinions

As we emphasize throughout this report, agency leadership and personnel practices are central to employees' perceptions of their jobs and their agencies. Employee opinions are also influenced by trends and events inside and outside the Federal Government. Next, we briefly discuss some factors that may have influenced Federal employees' opinions over the history of the MPS.

Economic Conditions and Historical Developments

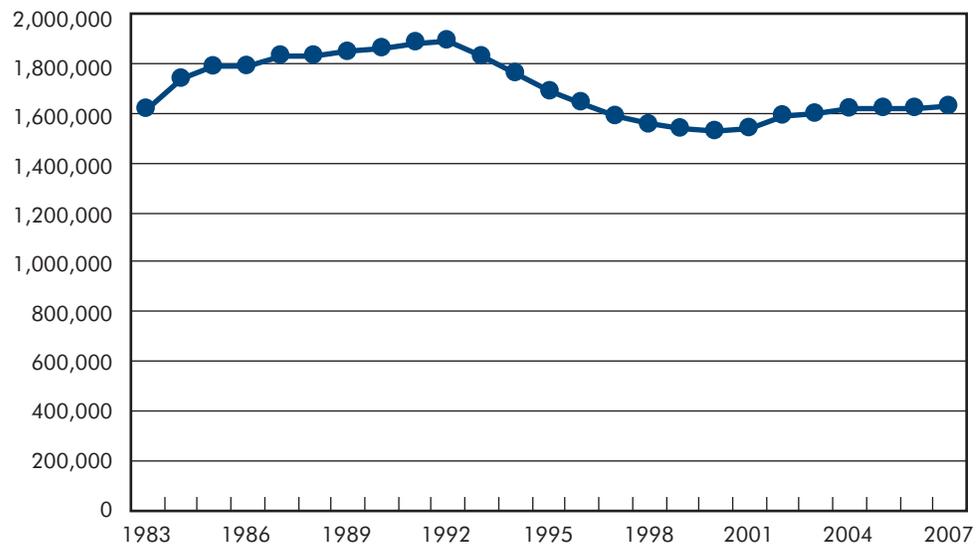
Economic conditions can affect how a Federal employee views his employer and the employment deal. For example, when the unemployment rate is running high and layoffs are looming, Federal employees may have greater appreciation for the relative stability of a civil service position. When economic growth slows, we typically witness an upturn in reported satisfaction, which may be due, in part, to the relative lack of more attractive alternatives.

Historical developments can also alter public attitudes toward Federal agencies and Federal employees, which can affect how Federal employees view their jobs. For example, after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, many U.S. citizens had a renewed sense of pride in their country and increased appreciation for public servants. Federal employees, especially those in fields related to security, intelligence, and defense, may have felt greater commitment to their missions and more pride in being a Federal civil servant.

Changes in the Federal Workforce

Although the level of permanent full-time Federal employment changed little from 1983 and 2007, employment levels have varied considerably over that period, from a high of approximately 1.9 million employees in 1992 to a low of approximately 1.5 million employees in 2000. As shown in **Figure 1**, decreases resulting from the restructuring and downsizing of the 1990s were offset by staffing increases to support new missions (such as the creation of the Transportation Security Administration) and new programs (such as the Medicare prescription drug benefit).

Figure 1. Permanent full-time Federal employees, 1983-2007



Source: U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM), Central Personnel Data File.

That Federal employee opinions appear to be influenced by workforce fluctuations is not surprising. If nothing else, downsizing would be expected to depress morale owing to increased workloads and decreased job security. Downsizing can also strain or terminate long-time work relationships, and a constant emphasis on reducing staff can lead employees to perceive that senior leaders (and members of the public) view them as costs rather than assets.

Changes in the Federal Workforce

The relative lack of change in the size of the Federal workforce from 1983 to 2007 conceals considerable changes in the composition of that workforce. As evidenced by the data in **Table 1**, on average, the Federal workforce has become more diverse in terms of gender and race, more educated, older and longer tenured in Federal service. Additionally, the Federal workforce is composed of a greater percentage of knowledge workers. For example, since 1983, employment in professional and administrative occupations has increased sharply, accompanied by a corresponding decrease in the percentage of employees in clerical and blue-collar occupations. This change in occupational distribution accounts for much, but not all, of the increase in average salary levels.

Table 1. Selected statistics on the Federal workforce

Statistic		Fiscal Year		
		1983	1995	2007
Demographics	Women	38%	43%	43%
	Minority	25%	29%	33%
	College Degree (BA/higher)	28%	38%	45%
Age	Average (years)	42.4 years	44.3 years	47.0 years
	29 years/younger	15%	7%	8%
	55 years/older	16%	13%	24%
Service	Average (years)	14.2 years	15.5 years	16.1 years
	9 years or less	39%	31%	36%
	30 years or more	7%	5%	11%
Occupations	Professional/Administrative	39%	52%	61%
	Clerical	20%	11%	6%
	Blue-Collar	21%	15%	11%
Pay	General Schedule	98%	94%	78%
	Average Salary	\$24,323	\$41,326	\$68,439
	Average Salary (Adjusted)	\$55,156	\$60,615	\$68,439

Source: OPM, Central Personnel Data File. Data for permanent full-time employees.

Salaries were adjusted to September 2007 levels using the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Employment Cost Index (ECI) for wages and salaries.

Changes in Federal Agency Human Resources Systems

Changes in the Federal workforce have been accompanied by changes in how Federal agencies recruit, pay, and manage that workforce. For example, the increase in average salaries reflects not only changes in the composition of the Federal workforce, but also efforts to maintain a competitive pay structure.⁹ Concerns emerged in the late 1980s that uncompetitive salaries were impairing the Government's ability to recruit and retain employees.¹⁰ This led to the enactment of the Federal Employees Pay Comparability Act of 1990 (FEPCA), which provided for different locality rates, annual pay adjustments designed to close the "pay gap" between private and Federal pay, and granted authority to pay recruitment, relocation and retention bonuses.¹¹

⁹ It is difficult to make any direct comparison between Federal and non-Federal salaries or total compensation. However, FEPCA established a process for collecting data on non-Federal pay and adjusting Federal salaries to reduce any observed "pay gap." We also note that special salary rates and direct-hire authorities—two possible responses to noncompetitive salaries—are much less common now than in the late 1980s or early 1990s.

¹⁰ Dale Belman and John S. Heywood, "The Structure of Compensation in the Public Sector," *Public Sector Employment In a Time of Transition*, Industrial Relations Research Association, Madison, WI, 1996, p. 142.

¹¹ "Federal Employees Pay Comparability Act of 1990," Public Law 101-509, Section 529, 101st Congress, Nov. 5, 1990.

Benefits have also changed, especially when compared to benefits offered by non-public sector employers. The Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS), which became effective in 1987, differs markedly from its predecessor, the Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS). FERS is often perceived as less generous than CSRS, because an employee covered by FERS will generally receive a smaller salary-based annuity than an employee covered by CSRS.¹² However, that characterization is not necessarily accurate, and readers should not assume that Federal retirement benefits have become less attractive over time. First, we note that FERS includes significant features that CSRS does not.¹³ Second, annuities of the type provided by both CSRS and FERS have become much less common since the MPS was first administered in 1983. From 1983 to 2003, the percentage of full-time employees in medium and large private establishments who participated in a defined benefit retirement plan declined from 82 percent to 33 percent.¹⁴

The Federal Government's approach to managing the civil service has also changed. There have been sustained efforts to delegate human resources authority (such as examining) to agencies and to make the "traditional" civil service system more flexible. Also, an increasing percentage of Federal employees are hired, paid, and managed under agency-specific alternative personnel systems, such as the National Security Personnel System in the Department of Defense. Such systems are increasing in both number and coverage, a trend reflected in the shrinking coverage of the General Schedule pay system. From 1983 to 2007, the percentage of white-collar Federal employees paid under the General Schedule or a related pay system declined from 98 percent to 78 percent.

How Workforce Demographics Can Influence Employee Opinions

Employee opinions are shaped not only by *what* the employees experience but *who* they are. Human beings define themselves (and others) on a variety of bases, including work-related characteristics such as agency, supervisory status, and occupation and personal characteristics, such as gender, ethnicity and race, age, and education. Often, these personal characteristics form the basis on which some employees believe that they are discriminated against in employment matters. For this reason, it is important to analyze survey responses by demographic group to look for differences across groups and for changes over time.

¹² See, for example, Tammy Flanagan, "CSRS vs. FERS," *Government Executive: Retirement Planning*, Mar. 31, 2006, <http://www.governmentexecutive.com>.

¹³ For a summary of the major features of FERS, see OPM's *Federal Employees Retirement System (An Overview of Your Benefits)*, April 1998, <https://www.opm.gov/forms/pdfimage/RI90-1.pdf>.

¹⁴ Employee Benefits Research Institute, *EBRI Databook on Employee Benefits*, Chapter 10, <http://www.ebri.org/publications/books/index.cfm?fa=databook>. The benefits information in this publication was based on data from the Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics.

In this report, we focus our analysis and discussion on three of those bases: the work-related characteristic of agency and the personal characteristics of gender, and ethnicity and race. We focus on these characteristics because of their implications for human resources policy and practice, and fair treatment and in the case of agency, the importance of leadership, organizational culture, and environment. Other categories, such as age, education, occupation, and supervisory status, are also discussed, but to a lesser extent.¹⁵ Below, we briefly describe how agency, gender, and ethnicity and race can influence employee opinions.

Agency. Agency influences employee opinion because agencies differ in many important ways, including mission, history, level of resources, leadership, organizational culture, human resources policy and practice, workforce demographics, and operating environment. Working as a U.S. Department of Agriculture forester in a national forest is quite different from working as a budget analyst in the National Aeronautics and Space Administration headquarters. Consequently, it is critical to acknowledge and analyze agency differences when looking for trends and patterns in Federal employees' opinions regarding their jobs and their employers.

In our surveys, "agencies" correspond to cabinet level departments, such as the Department of the Interior and the Department of Veterans Affairs, and large independent agencies such as the Social Security Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency. This definition of agency does not reflect every material difference in Federal employees' jobs and work environments.¹⁶ Nevertheless, it is sufficient to provide valuable insight into the effect of agency differences on employee perceptions, and to confirm that agency leadership, policy, and practice are critical to employee morale and productivity.

Gender. Perhaps the most fundamental way people view themselves and others is by gender. Roles and expectations, in both work and family life, have historically differed greatly for men and women. That makes gender potentially important for two reasons. First, gender can affect outcomes. Women have often had fewer opportunities than men to attain positions with high status, influence, and pay. Second, gender can affect career expectations and goals, and perceptions of and responses to events in the workplace.

¹⁵ These categories receive less attention for several reasons, including importance, statistical significance, correlation with other dimensions, and availability of data.

¹⁶ For example, employees in the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the Census Bureau all work for the Department of Commerce, but the missions and workforces of those agencies are quite distinct. However, cost and administrative burden preclude administering the MPS in a way that would permit analysis of results at the bureau or component level of every agency.

Ethnicity and race. Ethnicity and race¹⁷ are categories used to group people who have “racial, national, religious, linguistic, or cultural heritage” in common or a shared “history, nationality, or geographic distribution.”¹⁸ One way that ethnicity and race can affect survey responses stems from the different experiences, both inside and outside the workplace, that members of different ethnicity and racial groups may have. Experiences may differ for many reasons, including culture and personal history, discrimination, and common factors other than ethnicity or race, such as occupation, employing agency, or location. Another effect of ethnicity and race is that members of different groups may interpret experiences in the workplace differently. For example, a person who believes that he has experienced or witnessed discrimination may be more likely to attribute not being selected for a promotion to discrimination (as opposed to relative ability) than would a person who has never experienced overt discrimination.

¹⁷ The Federal Government regards the ethnicity and race as distinct. For example, under the ethnicity and race and national origin coding system utilized by the Federal Government, employees report whether or not they are of Hispanic ethnicity and in a separate item, report their race and national origin. See Office of Management and Budget, “Revisions to the Standards for the Classification of Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity; Notices,” 62 FR 58781-58790, October 20, 1997.

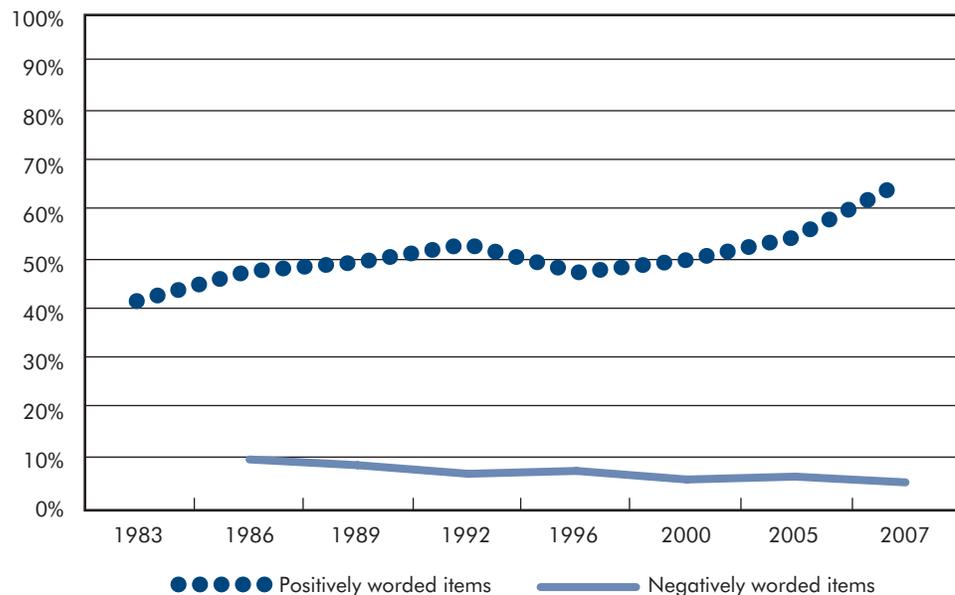
¹⁸ The American Heritage College Dictionary, Houghton Mifflin, 2002, pages 480 and 1146.

Overall Trends and Patterns in Federal Employee Opinions

Overall Trends

To provide a broad perspective on how employee perceptions of Federal employment have changed over time, we consolidated items for each year in which we have administered the Merit Principles Survey. We did this by (1) calculating the average percentage of affirmative responses (e.g., “agree”, “yes,” “satisfied”) to positively worded items; and (2) calculating the average percentage of affirmative responses to negatively worded items.¹⁹ We then plotted those averages for each MPS. The resulting trends are depicted in **Figure 2**: a marked increase in agreement on positively worded MPS items and a small but significant decline in agreement on negatively worded items.

Figure 2. Affirmative responses to survey items, 1983-2007



¹⁹ In a positively worded item, the item describes an ideal or desired state, and agreement is “good.” An example of a positively worded item is “I receive the training I need to perform my job.” In a negatively worded item, the item describes an undesired state and disagreement is “good.” An example of a negatively worded item is “I need more training to perform my job effectively.” Of the 60 items included in this study (as listed in Appendix C), 36 are positively worded and 21 are negatively worded, and 3 cannot be categorized as either positively or negatively worded.

On some items, the changes in employee opinion were striking. For example, between 1989 and 2005, the percentage of employees who were satisfied with their pay rose 32 percent and the percentage of employees who would recommend the Federal Government as an employer increased 27 percent. In terms of negative events in the Government, declines in perceptions of discrimination based on ethnicity and race and gender have been the most notable, with decreases of 9 percent and 8 percent, respectively, between 1992 and 2007.

Differences Across Groups

Agency. We found that agency usually influenced employee opinions much more strongly than demographic factors such as ethnicity and race, gender, and age. That was especially true for items concerning organizational culture and general working conditions (as opposed to items that concerned specific experiences). **Table 2** compares variation among agencies and variation among demographic groups for selected survey items.

Table 2. Positive responses to selected MPS items, 2005

Item	Range within Dimension (Low—High)			
	Agency	Ethnicity and Race	Gender	Supervisory Status
I would recommend my agency as a place to work.	59%–83%	62%–69%	65%–66%	64%–74%
My job makes good use of my skills and abilities.	58%–72%	63%–72%	67%–69%	66%–78%
I receive the training I need to perform my job.	46%–75%	52%–66%	61%–65%	61%–72%
Recognition and rewards are based on performance in my work unit.	38%–58%	32%–52%	45%–45%	42%–66%

Note: The low and high percentages are the lowest and highest group values for that dimension. For agency, there were 21 different groups, corresponding to major agencies and departments. For ethnicity and race, there were five groups. For gender and supervisory status, there were only two (men/women and nonsupervisors/supervisors).

Our analysis confirmed that differences among agencies are not simply the product of underlying differences in occupation, pay, or demographics. As we discuss below, differences in employment (such as occupational category and supervisory status) and demographics (such as ethnicity and race) do influence opinions. However, agency proved more influential than other differences on responses to a given survey item.

For example, one might expect employees in professional and administrative occupations, who (in theory) have greater autonomy on the job and receive higher salaries than employees in other occupations, to hold positive opinions on matters

such as pay satisfaction, empowerment, and job satisfaction.²⁰ Our analysis supported this reasoning—but also revealed that the relationship between position and opinion is not very strong. It's true that, in 2005, the agency with the highest reported levels of job satisfaction and empowerment was an agency with a high percentage of professional and administrative employees. But it's also true that some agencies with similar workforce profiles fared quite poorly.

Gender. Over time, we have found that men and women in the Federal workforce hold similar opinions on most issues. That was true of even the earliest administrations of the Merit Principles Survey. This suggests that, at least within the past 25 years, the Federal Government has generally been successful in creating a work environment where women feel that they have been treated fairly and equitably.

Ethnicity and race. Although differences among ethnicity and racial groups have diminished over time, suggesting that agencies have made progress in treating employees equitably,²¹ significant differences persist in many areas. Notably, minority employees were often more likely to report that they had been treated unfairly, and less likely to hold favorable opinions of agency human resources practices. Nevertheless, despite those differences, minority employees often viewed other aspects of Federal Government employment more favorably than nonminority employees.

Supervisory status. Supervisors' opinions were more positive than nonsupervisors' opinions on most survey items. In particular, supervisors viewed their jobs more positively than nonsupervisors and were more likely to hold favorable views of agency awards and promotion practices. That pattern is not surprising, given the nature of the supervisory role and their direct involvement in personnel decisions. However, we found one noteworthy exception to this pattern: resource allocation. Supervisors were less likely than nonsupervisors to agree that they had the resources needed to do their jobs well, or to agree that their work unit had enough employees, suggesting that supervisors feel resource issues more acutely than their subordinates.

Age. Age accounted for some differences between employees on a number of items. Some differences were consistent with logical expectations. For example, older employees were less likely to report that they needed more training—perhaps because many already have substantial knowledge and experience in their field. Also, older employees were more likely to report experiencing age-based discrimination and unfair treatment in career advancement, which may reflect the decreasing opportunities available to employees at the top of their established career ladders.

²⁰ The survey items that relate to empowerment on the job are “My opinions count at work.” and “The work I do is meaningful to me.” The survey item on pay satisfaction is “Overall, I am satisfied with my pay.”

²¹ We repeat our previous caution that differences across ethnicity and racial groups are difficult to interpret and potentially misleading.

However, there were also some surprising results. For example, one might expect older, typically more tenured employees to report greater satisfaction, reasoning that dissatisfied employees would have left Federal service at some point in their careers. In contrast, we found that older Federal employees were less likely to recommend the Federal Government as an employer. That may reflect a comparative lack of advancement opportunities, a perception that older employees are devalued or taken for granted, or other factors. Whatever the reasons, this result should caution agencies against equating retention with job satisfaction, or interpreting an employee's decision to stay as an endorsement of an agency's culture and working conditions.

Education, occupation, and salary. These closely related categories (education influences occupation, and occupation directly impacts salary)²² can affect survey responses in predictable ways but also in unexpected ways. While available data did not permit extensive analyses, we did identify some differences among groups, including the unexpected finding that higher-paid employees were less likely to recommend the Federal Government as a place to work, which may reflect a difference in pay competitiveness at various levels of the Government. However, the differences we found were small, especially when compared to differences within categories such as agency and ethnicity and race. Moreover, these categories tend to be correlated with factors such as supervisory status and agency, which were much more influential. The bottom line is that education, occupation, and salary can influence employee opinions, but agencies should avoid making assumptions about employees' career aspirations, abilities, or attitudes that are grounded in stereotypes of employees in a particular occupation or who have attained (or not attained) a given level of pay or education.

²² Our statistical analyses used occupational category (e.g., professional, administrative, clerical) instead of occupational series.

Survey Results From 1983 to 2007

Effective human resources systems and policies are indispensable, providing a foundation for merit-based hiring, fair and competitive compensation, assessing performance, and recognizing excellence. Yet such systems and policies are only a foundation for a motivated, high-performing workforce. Employers seeking a stable, committed, and productive workforce cannot rely on policy alone; they must also be attentive to the work itself, working conditions, and employee attitudes about the job and the organization. For this reason, the Merit Principles Survey has routinely sought employee opinions on job satisfaction, the work environment, and the Federal Government as an employer.

Job Satisfaction

Our analysis of the survey data suggests that job satisfaction comprises three distinct, but related aspects. These aspects are the employee's perceptions of: (1) the Government as an employer; (2) the job itself; and (3) the job context—the conditions affecting how and how well the job is performed. **Table 3** lists the MPS items related to each aspect:

Table 3. MPS items related to job satisfaction

Job Satisfaction Aspect	Merit Principles Survey Items
The employer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ I would recommend the Federal Government as a place to work. ■ I would recommend my agency as a place to work.
The job	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The work I do is meaningful to me/important. ■ In general, I am satisfied with my job.
The job context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ My job makes good use of my skills and abilities. ■ I know what is expected of me at work. ■ I am treated with respect in my work unit. ■ My opinions count. ■ I have the resources I need to do my job. ■ I receive the training I need to perform my job.

Statistical analysis of the relationships among these survey items leads to an important conclusion: agencies hold the keys to job satisfaction, and the most important keys are organizational culture and the work itself. Over the years, the MPS items that have best predicted overall job satisfaction were willingness to recommend the agency, having meaningful work, and having a job that makes good use of skills and abilities. The implications are clear: agencies should market their missions—but then they must deliver challenging, fulfilling jobs. Fair pay and fair treatment are essential, but not entirely sufficient.

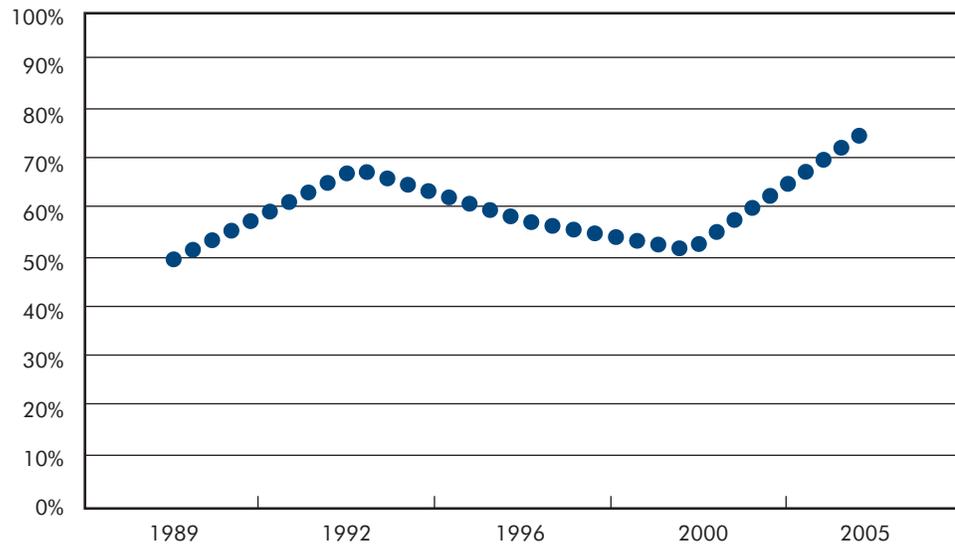
The Employer

The item, “I would recommend the Federal Government as a place to work,” elicits an employee’s view of the Government in implicit comparison with other places to work (such as the private sector, state or local government, and nonprofit organizations). It encourages the respondent to consider several factors, ranging from pay and benefits to the work itself to the organizational culture. Although we don’t know how the respondents weigh these factors relative to one another, the resulting response is an overall assessment of the Federal Government as an employer.

As shown in **Figure 3**, Federal employees in recent years have come to view the Government as an employer much more positively than in the past. In 2005, 76 percent of respondents agreed that they would recommend the Government as a place to work, in contrast to only 49 percent in 1989. The vision of the Federal Government as a model employer is, and must always remain, a work in progress. Nevertheless, the upturn in attitudes in recent years may indicate that efforts to improve Federal pay, benefits, and working conditions have indeed paid dividends—and that, as reported in recent MSPB studies on new hires to the Federal Government, traditional features such as health benefits, retirement plans, and (relative) job security still have value.²³

²³ U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *Attracting the Next Generation: A Look at Federal Entry-Level Hires*, Washington, DC, January 2008, p. ii.

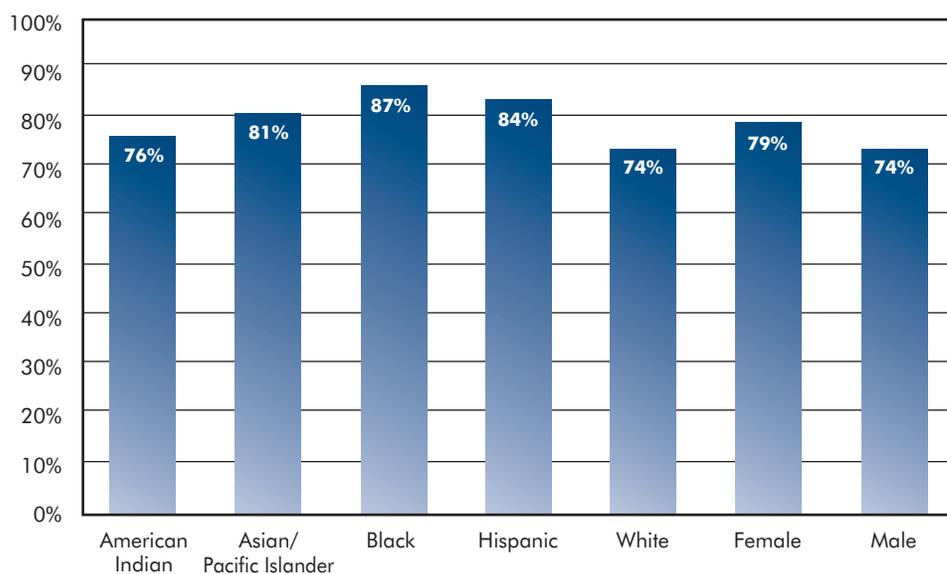
Figure 3. "I would recommend the Federal Government as a place to work," 1989-2005



Responses to this item have varied considerably from year to year, indicating that employees' perceptions of Federal employment are strongly influenced by events and conditions both outside and inside the Government. As discussed earlier in this report, external influences include such things as economic conditions, major external events (such as September 11, 2001), and public perceptions of Federal employees and Federal Government performance. Examples of internal influences include restructuring, changes in administration, and Presidential and Congressional initiatives.

Analysis of responses to this item by group revealed some differences that are shown in **Figure 4**. In particular, minority employees were more likely than nonminority employees, and female employees more likely than male employees, to recommend the Federal Government as a place to work. That may be a positive reflection of the Government's historical and continued attention to fair treatment—an interpretation supported by responses to other MPS items discussed later in this report—or it may mean that minorities and women place greater value on characteristics of Federal employment such as comparative job security, predictable pay and benefits, and an emphasis on internal equity.

Figure 4. "I would recommend the Federal Government as a place to work," by ethnicity and race and gender, 2005



It is interesting to note the difference between recommending the *Federal Government* as a place to work and recommending the *agency* as a place to work. In 2005, 76 percent of employees recommended the Government, but only 66 percent recommended their agency. This suggests that the Government is widely perceived as offering a good employment deal in terms of pay and benefits. However, these advantages do not guarantee a fulfilling job or a positive work environment, which are determined more by local and agency-specific conditions than by Governmentwide systems and policies.

The Job

Table 4 shows the 1986-2007 employee responses to two items that ask employees about how they view their jobs. Overall, responses were positive: most employees indicated that they were satisfied with their jobs, and the vast majority found their work meaningful and important.

Table 4. Positive responses to MPS job items, 1986-2007

Item	Survey Year						
	1986	1989	1992	1996	2000	2005	2007
The work I do is meaningful.	81%	88%	87%	87%	78%	86%	91%
All in all, I am satisfied with my job.	68%	70%	72%	71%	67%	71%	

Note: Gray shading indicates that the item was not included in that year's version of the MPS.

Although most Federal employees regard their work as meaningful, the level of job satisfaction has not increased over time. Thus, while the Federal Government has succeeded at making Federal *employment* more inviting, it has not made comparable headway in making Federal *work* more satisfying. Responses to survey items on the job context, discussed below, provide some possible explanations for why employees' perceptions of Federal work have not improved to the same extent as have perceptions of the Federal employment deal.

The Job Context

Results on items related to the job context—matters such as the job/skills match, employee empowerment, adequacy of resources, and training—are mixed, suggesting that the Government is not making the fullest or most efficient use of its human capital (more directly, its employees and their talents). **Table 5's** summary of responses to the job context items over time helps reveal the Government's strengths and the areas needing improvement:

Table 5. Positive responses to MPS job context items, 1983-2007

Item	Survey Year					
	1983	1992	1996	2000	2005	2007
I know what is expected of me at work.				83%	85%	
I am treated with respect at work.				71%	76%	81%
I have the resources to do my job well.				62%	64%	69%
I receive the training I need to do my job.		59%		56%	63%	
I need more training to perform my job effectively.		32%	37%	48%	48%	
My job makes good use of my skills and abilities.	74%	69%	69%	63%	68%	
My opinions count at work.			54%	55%	54%	

Note: Gray shading indicates that the item was not included in that year's version of the MPS.

The picture that emerges is one of unrealized potential. On the positive side, employees understood—at least in a general way—what their agencies expect of them. And a majority of employees agreed that they have the resources and training needed to get the job done. However, those majorities are far from overwhelming; many appeared to believe that their performance is compromised by a lack of training or shortfalls in staffing or other resources. Progress has been made in some areas (the increased percentage of employees reporting that they have sufficient resources), but in other areas progress appears to be limited or tenuous.

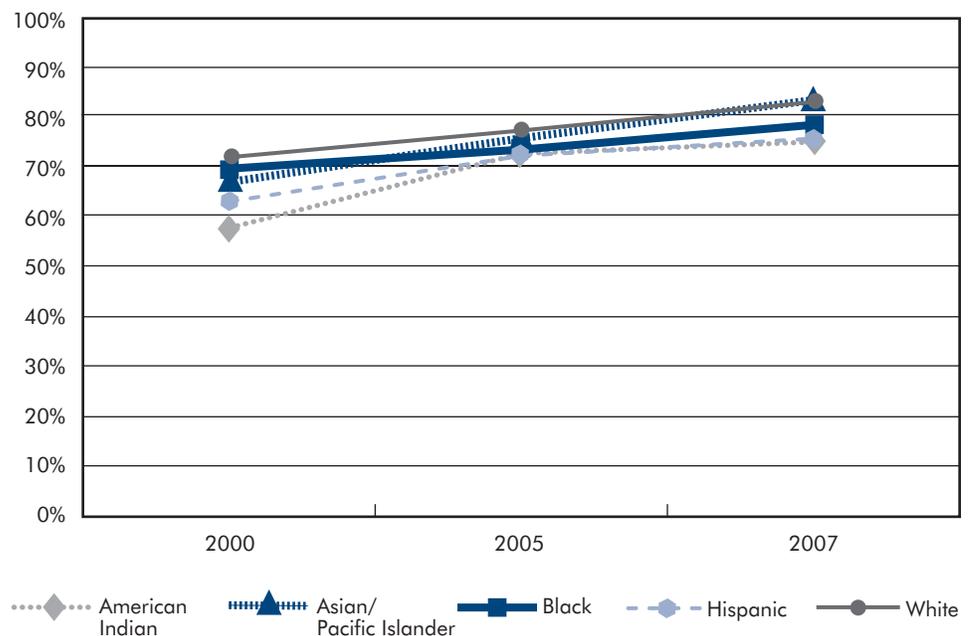
One such area is training. More employees reported that they receive the training they minimally needed to do their jobs—yet more employees reported that they need more training. This is understandable given increasing percentages of Federal

employees employed in fields that evolve and advance at an ever-increasing pace. But the fact that this pattern of responses is understandable does not make it acceptable. If agencies are providing training that is adequate, but less than optimal, this is perhaps better interpreted as an “opportunity for improvement” than a cause for complacency.

Similarly, the response patterns and trends in items related to skills utilization and employee empowerment are not reassuring. For example, the percentage of employees who reported that their job makes good use of their skills and abilities has not increased. Also, despite initiatives to empower employees and make agencies more agile and responsive, the percentage of employees who agreed that their work opinions matter remains flat at 55 percent, only a narrow majority.

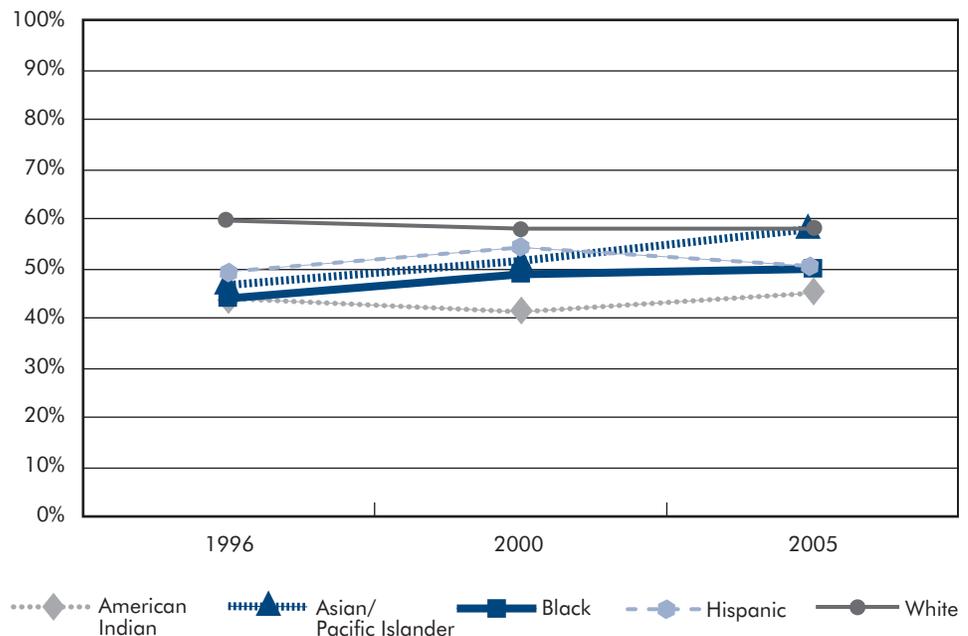
There is good news: the Federal Government’s continued attention to workplace fairness appears to have made a difference. The percentage of employees who reported that they are treated with respect at work has risen slowly but steadily, from 71 percent in 2000 to 81 percent in 2007. Despite this positive trend, however, we found continuing differences by ethnicity and race. Although minority employees were more likely than nonminority employees to recommend the Federal Government as an employer, **Figure 5** shows that some minority employees remained less likely to report that they are treated with respect at work:

Figure 5. “I am treated with respect at work,” by ethnicity and racial group, 2000-2007



While the overall trend on respectful treatment is positive, other MPS results show that respectful treatment, on a personal level, cannot be equated with being heard. Efforts to focus on front-line employees, make Government more responsive and service-oriented, and devolve authority and decision making to lower levels have not visibly affected Federal employees' sense of empowerment. For example, in 2005, only 54 percent of Federal employees agreed that their opinions count at work, unchanged from 1996. As shown in **Figure 6**, Asian/Pacific Islander employees became more positive regarding this item between 1996 and 2005, while other minority employees remained less likely to agree that their opinions count at work.

Figure 6. "My opinions count at work," by ethnicity and racial group, 1996-2005



These differences by ethnicity and race are not necessarily the result of overt discrimination or an unconscious devaluation of the opinions of minority employees. Instead, they may reflect differences in the occupational and agency distribution of employees. For example, although the percentage of minorities in higher graded (typically professional and administrative) positions has increased over time, clerical and blue collar jobs, which typically have less autonomy and status than professional and administrative jobs, are still disproportionately held by minority employees.

Nonetheless, the results indicate that agencies and supervisors should take care to ensure that efforts to obtain employee input into work priorities, processes, and conditions are truly inclusive—and to ensure that employee input, once obtained, is given serious consideration. While there is no guarantee that efforts to listen to

employees' opinions and to create a more open, collaborative work environment will yield immediate or dramatic improvements in employee opinions, there are compelling reasons to try. First, improvement is indeed possible. We found significant variations among agencies on this item, which confirms that respondents' opinions (and the conditions and practices that shape those responses) can, in fact, be influenced by agency action. Second, the data confirm what seasoned leaders and employees understand: it is much easier to change policies than it is to change organizational cultures (for an example, it is much easier to issue a written telework policy than it is to make telework a normal and accepted way of doing business).

Satisfaction with the Supervisor

Supervisors serve a vital role in organizations. Not only are they responsible for achieving organizational goals, but they are keys to managing employees in a manner consistent with the merit principles, whose requirements range from treating employees fairly and equitably to managing employees efficiently and effectively. Our analyses indicated that employees believe that their supervisor determines the amount of information that is shared and they hold him or her responsible, to some extent, for whether the workplace has an atmosphere of cooperation and teamwork. In view of these and other responsibilities and challenges that the supervisory role entails, the Merit Principles Survey has included a number of items asking employees about the quality and effectiveness of the supervision they receive.

We found that an employee's perceptions of his or her supervisor comprise three distinct aspects: competence, communication, and performance management. **Table 6** lists these aspects and the associated MPS items.

Table 6. MPS items related to satisfaction with the supervisor

Supervisor Aspect	Merit Principles Survey Items
Competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ My supervisor has good management skills.■ Overall, I am satisfied with supervisor.■ My supervisor has good technical skills.■ Overall, I am satisfied with managers above my immediate supervisor.
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ My supervisor keeps me informed about how well I am doing.■ A spirit of cooperation and teamwork exists in my work unit.■ Information is shared freely in my work unit.
Performance Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ My supervisor deals effectively with poor performers.■ Recognition and rewards are based on performance in my work unit.

Our analysis confirms what a growing body of research (and logic) suggests: supervisors matter greatly. Results from 2000 and 2005 revealed that how an employee regards his or her supervisor accounted for about 25 percent of job satisfaction. This finding has implications for both supervisors and agencies. For supervisors, it means that effective supervision (e.g., demonstrating good technical and managerial skills, sharing information, dealing with poor performers, and fostering cooperation and teamwork) can improve job satisfaction and

retention—not just productivity. For agencies, it means that efforts to improve productivity and employee engagement must include supervisors in a significant and meaningful way that recognizes their vital role in employee performance and job satisfaction.

Next, we examine each of the three elements of satisfaction with the supervisor for trends across time and differences between demographic groups.

Supervisor Competence

Table 7 shows the percentage of employees who responded favorably to four items related to supervisor competence.

Table 7. Positive responses to MPS supervisor competence items, 1986-2005

Item	Survey Year					
	1986	1989	1992	1996	2000	2005
My supervisor has good technical skills.	64%	67%	63%		60%	68%
My supervisor has good management skills.	49%	51%	51%	54%	47%	55%
Overall, I am satisfied with my supervisor.			60%	61%	58%	64%
Overall, I am satisfied with managers above my immediate supervisor.					37%	47%

Note: Gray shading indicates that the item was not included in that year's version of the MPS.

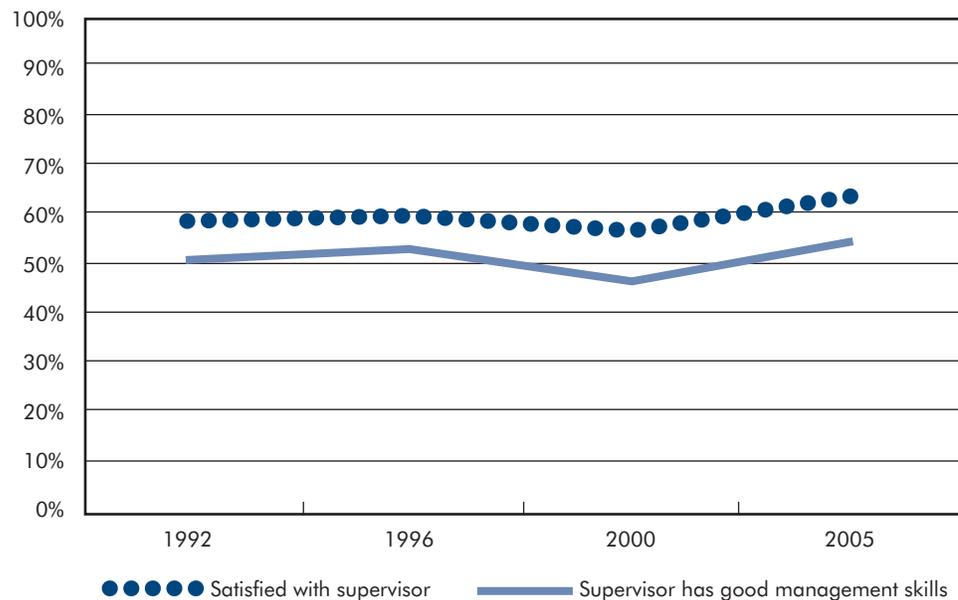
One pattern from Table 7 is notable: employees consistently held higher opinions of their supervisors' *technical* ability (60 percent to 68 percent favorable) than their supervisors' *management* ability (47 percent to 55 percent favorable). The gap between technical ability and management ability is significant, and it has narrowed very little over the last 20 years. That matters, for two reasons. First, our statistical analysis indicates that employee judgments of supervisory competence depend primarily on the supervisors' perceived management ability.²⁴ In fact, our analyses revealed that the employee's perception of the supervisor's management ability was the strongest predictor of the employee's satisfaction with the supervisor.²⁵

Figure 7 illustrates the strong relationship between these two variables.

²⁴ The Merit Principles Survey has not explored how managers assess the performance of their subordinate supervisors. Therefore, we do not know whether managers emphasize technical or managerial accomplishments when evaluating their subordinate supervisors, or whether managers believe that their subordinate supervisors' technical abilities exceed their management abilities.

²⁵ As much as 60 percent of how satisfied employees are with a supervisor is accounted for by how positively they regard the supervisor's management ability. We note that our analysis only shows a (strong) statistical relationship between responses to the two items; it does not prove a cause-effect relationship.

Figure 7. Perceived management ability of supervisor and satisfaction with supervisor, 1992-2005



Second, the technical/managerial gap points out the fact that management ability cannot be taken for granted. Technical ability in supervisors is easy to ensure: supervisors are frequently selected from among line employees (i.e., technical employees) affording selecting officials an extended opportunity to observe candidates' job performance (i.e., technical ability), and past performance often weighs heavily in selection decisions. In contrast, selecting officials may have little, if any, insight into a line employee's management ability when filling a supervisory position. Moreover, management ability, which depends heavily on interpersonal skills, judgment, and relationship-building, is often harder to develop.

Thus, the results shown in Table 7 and the selection considerations outlined above suggest that agencies should place greater emphasis on management ability (or supervisory potential) when filling supervisory positions, as noted in earlier MSPB reports.²⁶ Similarly, it appears that most Federal supervisors should focus more on improving their management ability than on improving their technical ability. The persistence of the difference also raises two questions that reach beyond supervisory selection and development: (1) do agency leaders allot their supervisors the time and resources required for effective supervision; and (2) do agency leaders and executives truly expect supervisors to tackle difficult, but necessary, personnel tasks such as addressing deficient performance? These two questions deserve serious consideration by top agency leadership.

²⁶ U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *Federal Supervisors and Strategic Human Resources Management*, June 1998.

Supervisor Communication

Recent results in this aspect of supervision provide a basis for cautious optimism. **Table 8** shows the proportion of employees responding favorably to the three items relating to supervisor communication. In 2005, responses were notably more positive than responses in 2000 for two of the three items and for the third item, the response remained unchanged. These findings suggest that supervisors are moving toward a more communicative and cooperative work environment.

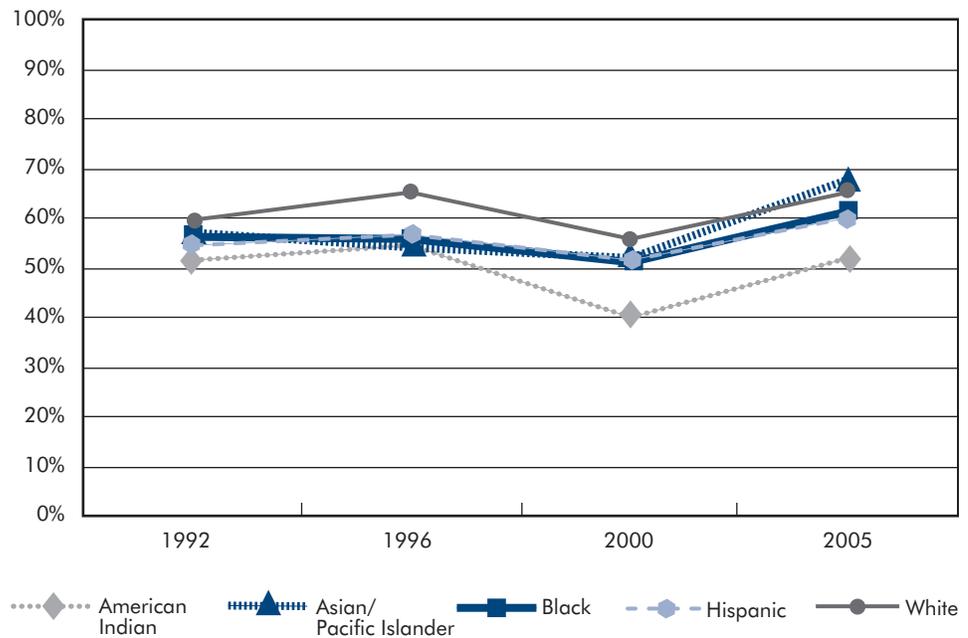
Table 8. Positive responses to MPS supervisor communication items, 1986-2005

Item	Survey Year				
	1986	1992	1996	2000	2005
My supervisor keeps me informed about how well I am doing.	47%			46%	58%
A spirit of cooperation and teamwork exists in my work unit.		60%	64%	56%	65%
Information is shared freely in my work unit.				60%	60%

Note: Gray shading indicates that the item was not included in that year's version of the MPS. None of the items were asked in the 1989 or 2007 MPS.

Analysis of cooperation and teamwork items by ethnicity and race reveals two patterns: first, as shown in **Figure 8**, the percentage of positive responses on this item increased between 2000 and 2005 for all groups. Second, differences across groups persist. Thus, on the one hand, the recent improvement for all groups suggests that the increasing diversity of the Federal workforce has not harmed cooperation and teamwork. On the other hand, perceptions of workplace harmony are neither uniform nor universal.

Figure 8. "A spirit of cooperation and teamwork exists in my work unit," by ethnicity and racial group, 1992-2005



Supervisor Performance Management

First-line supervisors are central to performance management: they have primary responsibility for communicating performance expectations, monitoring and evaluating employee performance, providing feedback and counseling, and creating consequences for excellent or poor performance. **Table 9** shows positive responses over time to survey items related to creating consequences: rewarding good performers²⁷ and addressing poor performers.

Improvement is apparent in both areas of responsibility. This may reflect, in part, heightened attention to accountability, at both the organizational and individual level, and agency movement toward pay for performance systems. However, “better” should not be confused with “good enough.” In 2005, only 30 percent of employees believed that their supervisor dealt effectively with poor performers and in 2007 less than half agreed that recognition and rewards were based on performance.

²⁷ Statistical analysis associated the MPS item on the linkage between performance and rewards with the “supervisory satisfaction” factor. Although the first-line supervisor may not control all aspects of rewards and recognition (such as funding), he or she is usually instrumental in appraising employee performance and recommending, if not determining, rewards and recognition.

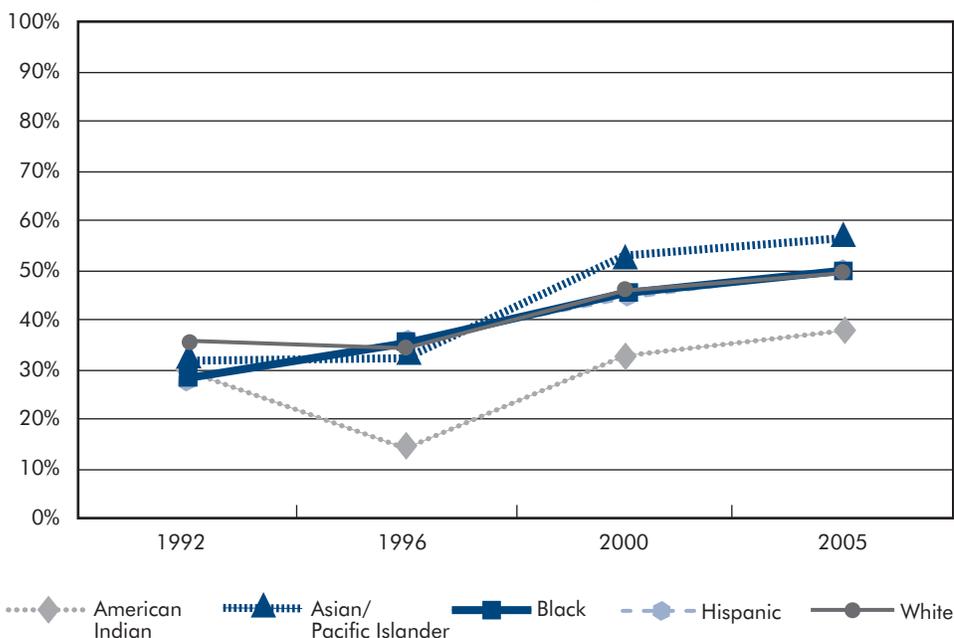
Table 9. Positive responses to MPS supervisor performance management items, 1983-2007

Item	Survey Year				
	1983	1992	2000	2005	2007
My supervisor deals effectively with poor performers.			22%	30%	
Recognition and rewards are based on performance in my work unit.	17%	33%	33%	45%	49%

Note: Gray shading indicates that the item was not included in that year’s MPS. Neither item was asked in survey years 1986, 1989, and 1996.

We examined employee perceptions of awards and recognition across ethnicity and racial groups for the years in which such data were available. **Figure 9** shows that all groups have become more likely to see a linkage between performance and rewards, but notable differences appear across groups. In 2005, 56 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander employees agreed that recognition and rewards were based on performance, while only 38 percent of American Indian employees agreed. We found that this difference results more from differences across organizations than from disparate treatment within an organization.²⁸ Nevertheless, agencies would be wise to monitor both how they distribute rewards and recognition and how different employee groups perceive agency performance and pay practices—a recommendation reinforced by the experience of several Federal agencies that have introduced new pay systems.²⁹

Figure 9. “Recognition and rewards are based on performance in my work unit,” by ethnicity and racial group, 1992-2007



²⁸ These two groups are markedly different in two important ways: occupational mix and distribution across agencies.

²⁹ See, for example, U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Symposium on Designing and Managing Market-Based and More Performance Oriented Pay Systems*, GAO 05 832SP, Washington, DC, July 2005.

Compensation, Recognition, and Fair Treatment

The merit principles emphasize the importance of workplace fairness, most visibly in requiring agencies to provide equal pay for work of equal value, recognize excellence in performance, and base personnel decisions on merit (factors such as performance, skills, and relative ability). Accordingly, the Merit Principles Survey has routinely included items concerning satisfaction with pay and recognition, perceptions about the relationship between performance and pay, and fair treatment in matters such as work assignments, training, and promotions. The MPS has also periodically explored the issue of employee trust in supervisors, recognizing that such trust is critical to the success of initiatives that give agencies and supervisors greater flexibility and discretion in matters such as hiring, pay, and promotions.

This section focuses on three aspects of workplace fairness: (1) compensation and recognition—whether employees believe that they receive “a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work”; (2) fair treatment in personnel matters; and (3) exercise of authority—whether employees trust their supervisor to use personnel authorities fairly and effectively. **Table 10** lists the survey items associated with each aspect of fairness.

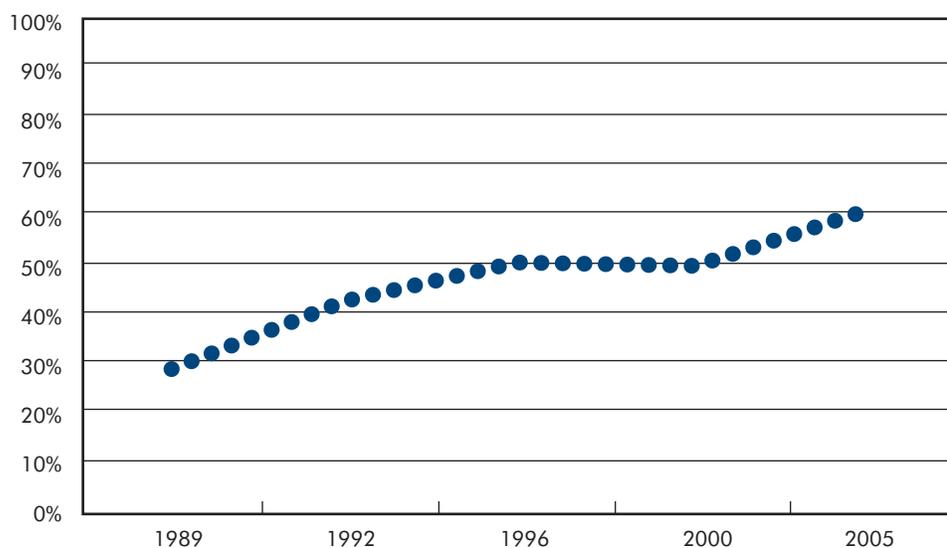
Table 10. MPS items related to compensation and recognition, fair treatment, and trust in supervisors

Aspect	Merit Principles Survey Items
Compensation and Recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Overall, I am satisfied with my pay. ■ The standards used to appraise my performance are appropriate. ■ I am satisfied with the recognition and awards I receive for my work. ■ If I perform well, it is likely I will receive a cash award or pay increase.
Fair Treatment	<p>In the past 2 years, to what extent have you been treated fairly regarding the following?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Career advancement/promotions ■ Awards ■ Training ■ Performance appraisals ■ Job assignments ■ Discipline
Trust in Supervisors	<p>To what extent do you think your supervisor will exercise each of the following authorities in a fair and effective manner?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Rating the qualifications of applicants for jobs ■ Selecting people for vacancies or promotions based on their qualifications ■ Setting individual employees’ pay within broad pay bands ■ Taking adverse actions such as suspensions and removals

Compensation and Recognition

Comparability between Federal and non-Federal employee compensation has been the subject of inquiry and study for many years and changes to Federal pay scales, benefits, and working conditions are routinely proposed and hotly debated. Some of this attention has resulted in measures to make Federal pay and benefits broadly competitive and these appear to have been helpful, even if some of those measures (such as the process for adjusting General Schedule pay rates established under the Federal Employees Pay Comparability Act of 1990) might not have been implemented as their creators envisioned. As illustrated in **Figure 10**, survey results show dramatic improvement in Federal employees' satisfaction with their pay.³⁰

Figure 10. "Overall, I am satisfied with my pay," 1989-2005



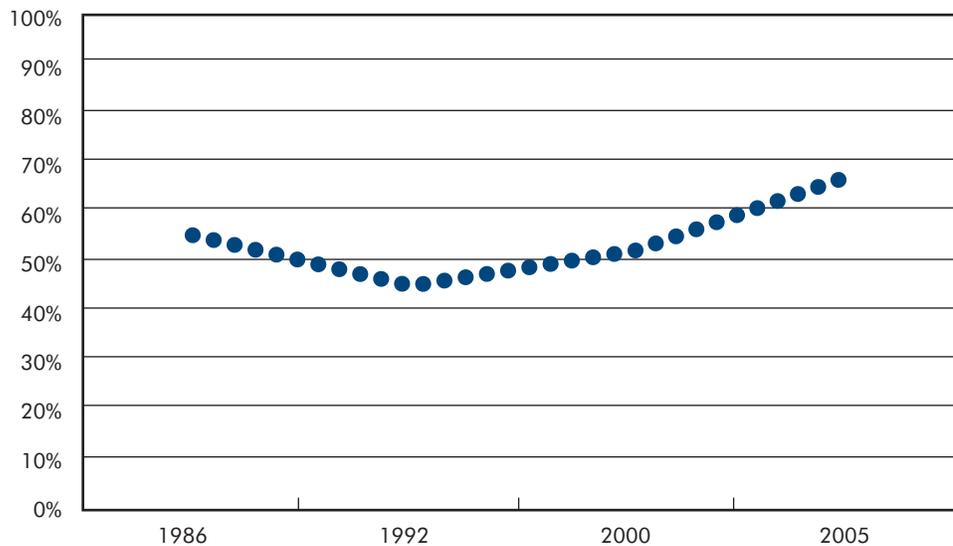
However, the overall trend masks continuing and considerable differences in pay satisfaction by ethnicity and race. Although satisfaction increased for all groups, the percentages of White and Hispanic employees reporting satisfaction have been consistently higher than percentages for other groups. The difference between the most satisfied group and the least satisfied group is notable: 11 percentage points. Differences in satisfaction do not correspond directly with differences in average salary levels, suggesting that satisfaction may be driven more by *relative* pay (actual pay in relation to what an employee believes he or she *should* be paid, based on such factors as coworkers' pay and pay offered by competing employers, as well as by the perceived fairness of the agency's pay practices) rather than by *absolute* pay. If so, agencies may need to remain attentive to internal equity (how they pay an employee in relation to other employees) as well as external equity (how they pay an employee in relation to other employers). It also suggests a need for continued attention to elements of compensation other than current salary, such as pay increases, awards,

³⁰ Increased satisfaction cannot be equated with universal or uniform satisfaction. Survey results should not be interpreted as evidence that pay levels have become more attractive or competitive across all occupations, grade levels, and locations.

and nonmonetary recognition. Survey results on items related to recognition and the link between performance and pay, which are discussed shortly, reinforce this point.

We also wanted to know if progress has occurred in the measurement of employee performance. As shown earlier in Table 5, most employees have a general sense of what is expected of them. That is necessary, but not sufficient. Agencies must also establish specific expectations, then use reasonable, credible performance standards to assess how well those expectations are met. As shown in **Figure 11**, the percentage of employees who reported that appropriate standards are used to assess their performance has risen considerably. This trend suggests that agencies increasingly understand the importance of having a “modern, effective, credible, and validated performance management system”³¹ and that efforts to improve goal setting and performance measurement at both the organizational and individual levels, such as the Government Performance Results Act (GPRA) and the Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART), have been beneficial.

Figure 11. “The standards used to evaluate my performance are appropriate,” 1986-2005



Fair performance standards and appraisals are important, but are not the end of the story. Appraisals should have consequences, both negative and positive. On the negative side, a poor performance appraisal should lead to corrective action. On the positive side, employees (and the merit principles) expect agencies to recognize excellence. Federal agencies have a wide (and increasing) variety of mechanisms for recognizing employees and making awards and pay increases reflective of differences in performance. However, survey results suggest that agency performance and progress in this area are uneven at best.

³¹ U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Designing and Managing Market-Based and More Performance Oriented Pay Systems*, GAO 05 1048T, Washington, DC, Sept. 25, 2007, p. 4.

Despite Federal employees finding apparent improvement in performance appraisal practices (or at least the performance standards on which appraisals are based), **Table 11** shows that a majority of Federal employees report a weak or nonexistent link between performance and pay. Not surprisingly, then, satisfaction with recognition is correspondingly low.

Table 11. Positive responses to MPS items related to recognition of performance, 1983-2005

Item	Survey Year				
	1983	1986	1989	2000	2005
If I perform well, it is likely that I will receive a cash award or pay increase.	35%	32%	36%	34%	40%
I am satisfied with the recognition and awards that I receive for my work.				37%	39%

Note: Gray shading indicates that the item was not included in that year’s version of the MPS.

There are at least four plausible reasons for these results. The first is structural. Many employees work under pay systems that limit agencies’ ability to recognize high performance with significant pay increases, particularly for long-time employees (a large and growing segment of the Federal workforce) who have past experience of, but limited prospects for, career promotions or within-grade pay increases. The second reason is cultural. Many Federal agencies have, at least in recent years, given high performance ratings to many—and sometimes the vast majority—of their employees. If this apparent reluctance to make distinctions in performance ratings carries over to awards and pay increases, then the recognition employees receive may be meaningless (because all are recognized, with little regard to actual performance) or trivial (because limited dollars are dispersed over a large number of employees). The third reason is financial: limited or inconsistent funding for recognition. The survey results shown in **Table 12** provide some indirect support for this reason. On most survey items, the trend in responses from 2000 to 2005 tends to be consistent across ethnicity and racial groups. For example, employees in every ethnicity and racial group became more likely to report that their performance standards are fair. In contrast, the change in responses to items concerning the link between performance and recognition/reward and satisfaction with recognition varied by ethnicity and racial group as some groups became more positive and others became less positive. These dynamics may reflect the fact that the pool of funds will often be judged as too limited and that those who must compete for rewards may perceive unfair allocation of these monies.

Table 12. Change in percentage of positive responses to MPS items on performance standards and recognition, by ethnicity and racial group, 2000-2005

Item	Ethnicity and Racial Group				
	American Indian	Asian/Pacific Islander	Black	Hispanic	White
The standards used to appraise my performance are appropriate.	+33.8%	+23.7%	+14.0%	+17.3%	+14.8%
If I perform well, it is likely that I will receive a cash award or pay increase.	-0.5%	+0.1%	-3.1%	+7.7%	+7.8%
I am satisfied with the recognition and awards that I receive for my work.	+11.4%	+7.6%	-2.5%	-0.5%	+2.3%

The fourth reason is related to credibility and trust. Fair performance standards do not necessarily translate into confidence in the results of the appraisal process (such as ratings and awards). Similarly, survey results on items relating to trust in supervisors show that general satisfaction with a supervisor cannot be equated with trust in a supervisor to make reward, recognition, and other high stakes decisions in a fair manner.

Fair Treatment

The Federal Government has made considerable progress in employee perceptions of fair treatment in human resources management.³² The survey results presented in **Table 13** for 1986-2005 show that the percentage of employees who perceived unfair treatment declined in nearly every area of human resource management, with the exception of discipline/adverse actions, where there was little change.

Table 13. Percentage of employees who perceived unfair treatment, by HR management area, 1986-2005

Area	Survey Year				Change	
	1986	1996	2000	2005	Period	Percent
Advancement	48%	47%	43%	39%	1986-2005	-9%
Awards	54%	41%	35%	33%	1986-2005	-21%
Discipline		26%	23%	25%	1996-2005	-1%
Training	39%	35%	27%	27%	1986-2005	-12%
Pay				23%	N/A	
Assignments	30%		23%	21%	1986-2005	-9%
Appraisals		26%	20%	19%	1996-2005	-7%

Note: Data for 1989 and 1992 are not shown.

³² We note that employees' perceptions of fairness are influenced by their experiences. For example, an employee who has received an award is more likely to report fair treatment than an employee who has not received an award. Also, the extent of employees' experience varies across the listed areas. For example, almost all employees receive an annual performance appraisal—but few Federal employees have ever received a formal disciplinary action. Therefore, employee responses to these questions should be viewed as a useful indicator of trends and patterns, but not as a precise or objective measure of the fairness of agency practices and decisions.

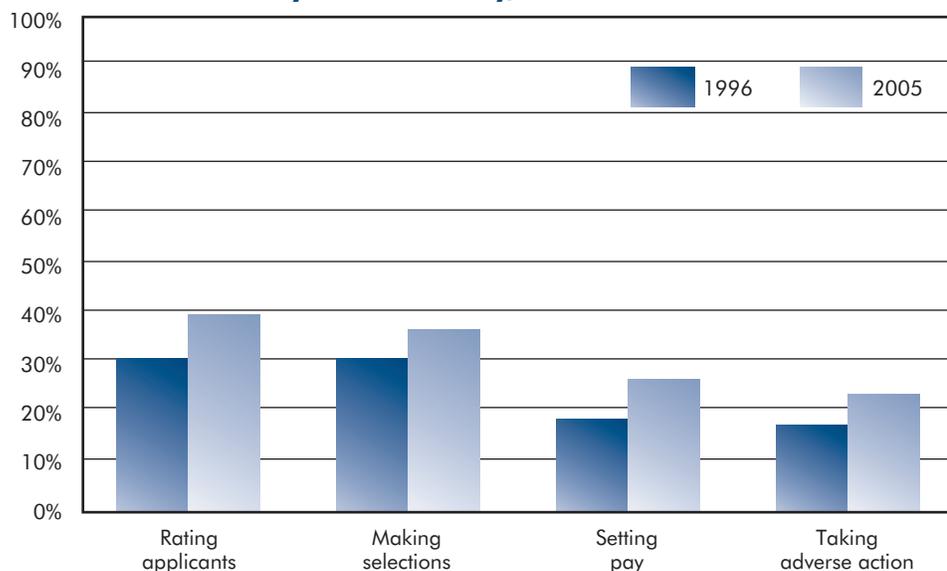
That trend was accompanied by corresponding increases in the percentage of employees reporting that they have been treated fairly. The trend was positive for all ethnicity and racial groups, but differences persist. Minority employees remained more likely to perceive unfair treatment (and less likely to report fair treatment) than nonminority employees.

We note that perceptions of unfair treatment were greatest in the areas of advancement and awards, although there was marked improvement in the 19-year period under review. It is not surprising that many employees continue to perceive unfair treatment in advancement and promotions: when there is competition for promotion, the number of unsuccessful applicants almost always exceeds the number of successful applicants. We also note that employees may not understand the reasons behind selection decisions (for example, that when making selections, managers often give more weight to observed performance and demonstrated potential than to experience and “paper” knowledge, skills),³³ and that unsuccessful applicants may be reluctant to attribute their nonselection to their personal shortcomings or to the superiority of a competing candidate.³⁴

Trust in Supervisors

Progress in perceptions of fair treatment has been accompanied by increased employee trust in supervisors. **Figure 12** shows a clear increase in the percentage of employees who would trust their supervisor to exercise personnel authorities fairly and effectively, although overall trust in these areas is still relatively low.

Figure 12. Percentage of employees indicating trust in the supervisor to exercise various personnel authorities fairly and effectively, 1996 and 2005

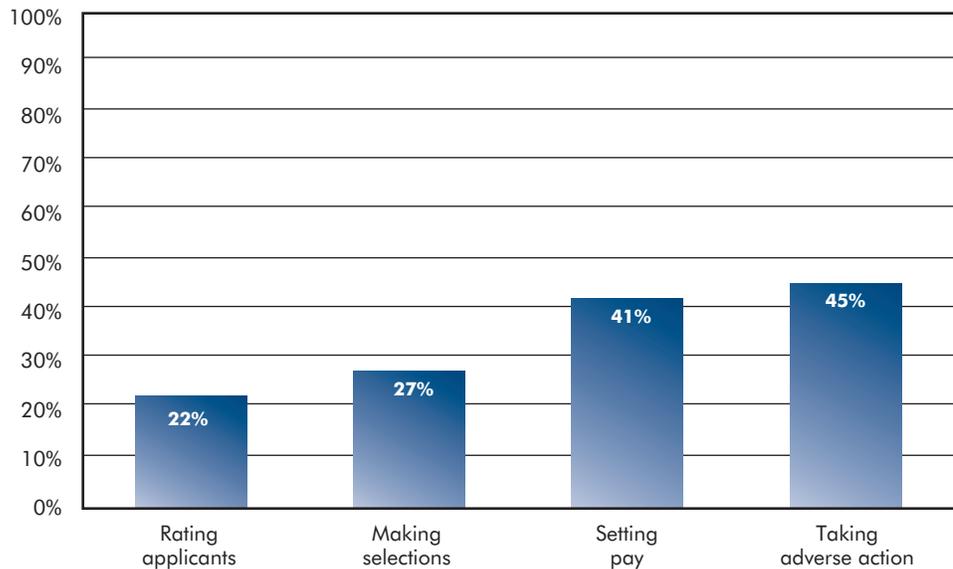


³³ See U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *The Federal Merit Promotion Program: Process vs. Outcome*, Washington, DC, December 2001, pp. 27-28.

³⁴ Career advancement was the subject of a recent MSPB survey whose results will be presented in an upcoming report that will explore in depth the factors related to career advancement.

This is a positive and essential development, given the Federal Government’s shift toward personnel systems that give agencies and supervisors greater discretion in matters such as hiring and pay and that emphasize assessments of individual ability and performance as a basis for personnel decisions. Yet employee discomfort with supervisory discretion, particularly in matters related to pay, remains widespread. As shown in **Figure 13**, 41 percent of employees had little confidence that their supervisor would make fair and effective use of the authority to set employee pay.

Figure 13. Percentage of employees reporting minimal or no trust in supervisor to exercise personnel authorities fairly and effectively, 2005



These results suggest that agencies need to do more to increase employee understanding of how and why personnel decisions are made, from promotions to assignments to pay. Employees are unlikely to view personnel decisions that they do not understand as fair or merit-based, particularly if those decisions (such as nonselection for a promotion or a lower-than-anticipated pay increase) are unfavorable. We recognize that complete openness in personnel decisions is neither practical nor permissible; Federal supervisors must respect employee privacy rights and preserve the integrity of agency decision-making processes.³⁵ The goal is to strike a balance between providing too little information and too much information, and that can be difficult. Therefore, training and guidance for supervisors on what types of information can be shared with employees, and how to communicate such information, could be beneficial to both employees and agencies.

We also recognize that employee understanding of personnel processes cannot assure universal employee acceptance of management decisions. Some level of mistrust is unavoidable. Agencies cannot expect every employee to welcome the rewards and risks inherent in pay for performance systems, or wait for universal, unreserved

³⁵ For example, it would be inappropriate for a supervisor to share the scoring key to an employment test.

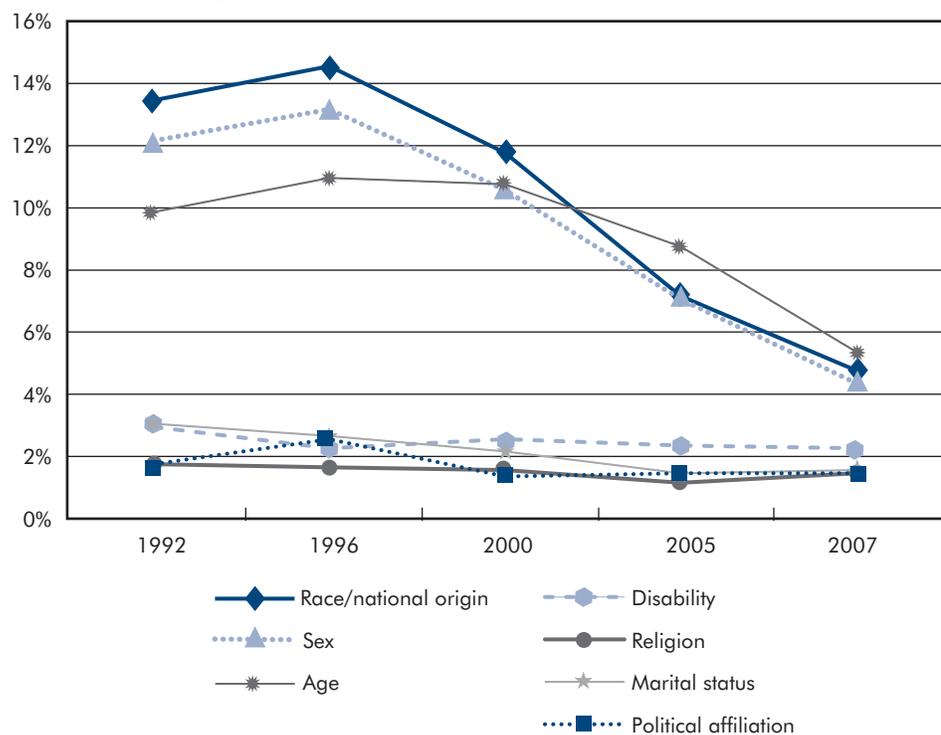
trust in management before creating meaningful rewards for excellence (and truly appropriate consequences for mediocrity or outright failure). However, the results should be viewed as a caution—and a guide to action—for Federal agencies, especially those seeking to reform their systems and practices in performance management and pay. First, agencies should ensure that their performance management systems can bear the weight and scrutiny that result from closely linking performance appraisals and pay increases or awards. Second, the low (and sometimes nonexistent) trust that some employees have in their supervisors indicates that agencies must also pay close attention to the human element in their performance management and pay systems. For example, if pay and award decisions lack transparency, it is easier for employees to attribute nonselection for these rewards to unfair treatment, rather than to poorer performance on their part.

Discrimination

Beyond laws requiring equal employment opportunity, which prohibit employment discrimination on bases such as sex, race and national origin,³⁶ religion, and disability, the merit principles require agencies to base personnel practices and decisions on merit. Moreover, agencies must guard against perceptions of discrimination or inequitable treatment, because even in the absence of actual discrimination, such perceptions can be highly damaging, with costs ranging from poor morale and lost productivity to costs associated with high turnover, complaints, and litigation.

Survey results indicate that the Federal Government has made substantial progress in achieving a workplace that is, and is perceived as, free of discrimination. As shown in **Figure 14**, reports of discrimination based on ethnicity and race, sex, and

Figure 14. Percentage of employees perceiving that they had been denied a job, promotion, or pay increase, by perceived basis of denial, 1992-2007



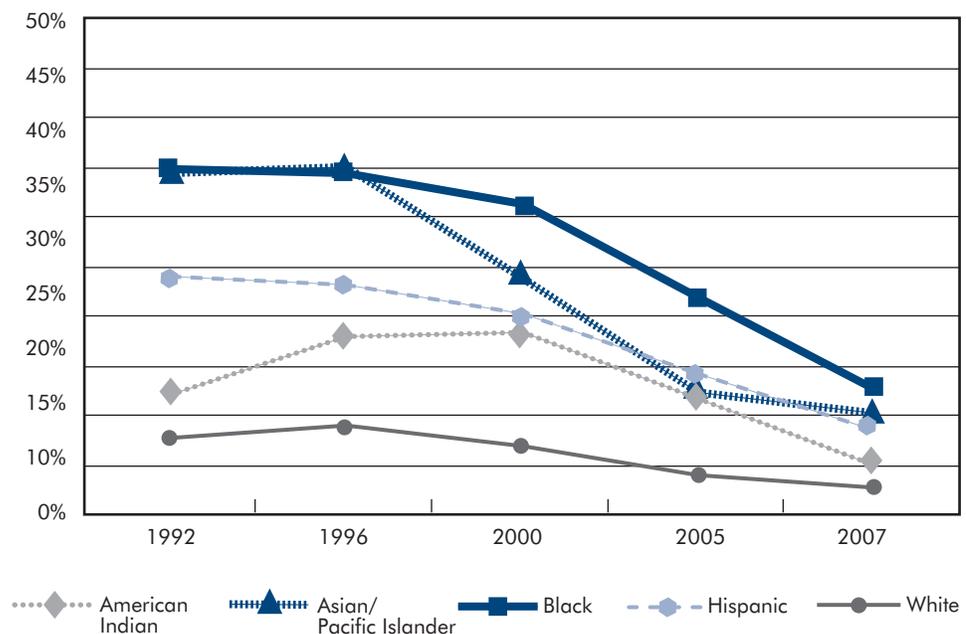
³⁶ In this report, we generally use the terms “gender” and “ethnicity and race.” However, the MPS items use the terms “sex” and “race and national origin” which we use here for consistency.

(to a lesser extent) age have dropped dramatically from 1992 to 2007, and reports of discrimination based on disability, religion, marital status, and political affiliation have remained quite low.³⁷ Ethnicity and race, sex, and age continue to be the most commonly reported bases for discrimination.³⁸

Ethnicity and race

Since 1996, the percentage of employees reporting ethnicity- or race-based discrimination has declined for all groups, as shown in **Figure 15**. In particular, the percentages of Asian/Pacific Islander, Black, and Hispanic employees who reported that they have experienced discrimination have dropped substantially. Nevertheless, in 2005 approximately 10 percent of employees in each of these groups reported experiencing discrimination within the previous 2 years.

Figure 15. Percentage of employees perceiving denial of a job, promotion, or other job benefit on the basis of race and national origin, by ethnicity and racial group, 1992-2007



³⁷ We note that a perception of discrimination or retaliation cannot be equated with an actual incident of discrimination or retaliation. Survey responses reflect the respondent's interpretation of events. For example, a respondent may use definitions of discrimination and retaliation that differ from the legal definitions of those terms or base his or her responses on incomplete or incorrect information.

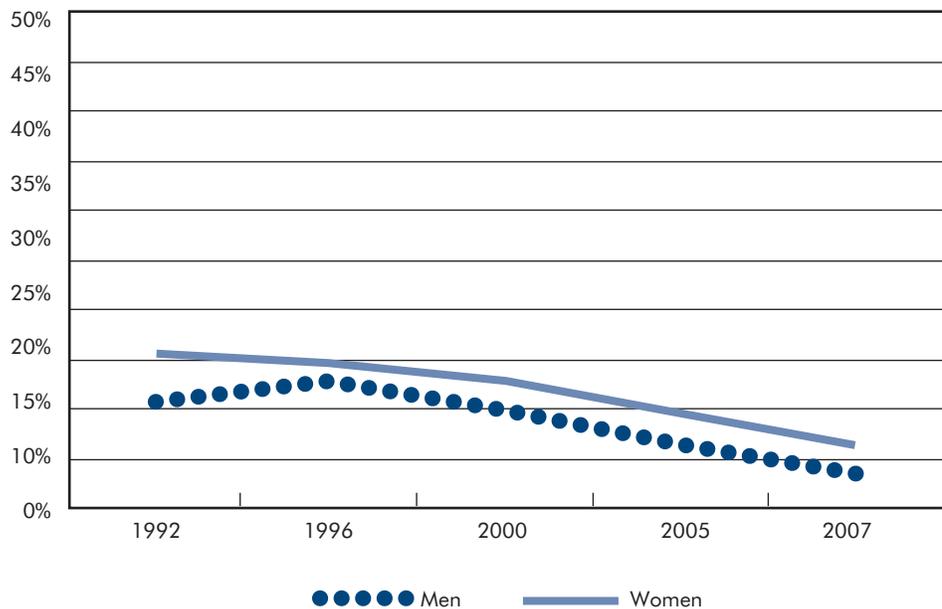
³⁸ The laws that prohibit discrimination also prohibit retaliation against individuals who oppose unlawful discrimination or participate in an employment discrimination proceeding (e.g., by filing an EEO complaint). Retaliation is addressed in a separate set of MPS items.

The pattern observed for most MPS items, in which responses from minority employees were less positive (favorable) with regard to discrimination than those of nonminority employees, appeared here also, but with two clear differences. First, on many nondiscrimination items (including items such as treatment with respect, having adequate training and resources, information sharing, teamwork and recognition), American Indian employees were the least positive, but they reported discrimination based on race and national origin at a rate lower than other minority groups. Second, on many nondiscrimination items (including information sharing, teamwork, fair performance standards, having opinions count, and satisfaction with supervisors and managers), Asian/Pacific Islanders were the most positive, but they believed that they had experienced discrimination at rates higher than those for all other groups except Black employees.

Gender

As we noted earlier, men and women responded similarly across most items that we have tracked longitudinally. Even responses about discrimination based on sex, depicted in **Figure 16**, showed no large differences between men and women during 1992-2007.

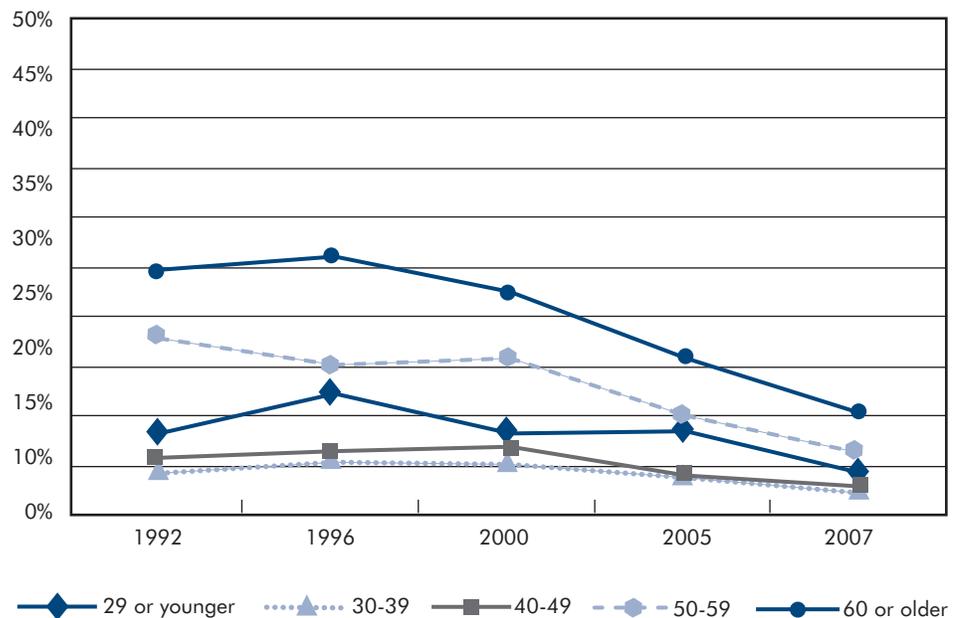
Figure 16. Percentage of employees reporting denial of a job, promotion, or other job benefit on the basis of sex, by gender, 1992-2007



Age

As shown in Figure 14, perceptions of age-based discrimination decreased from 9.8 percent to 5.3 percent between 1992 and 2007. Yet that decrease is smaller, in both absolute and relative terms, than the decreases in reports of ethnicity and race- and sex-based discrimination. Analysis of responses by age group within the context of an increase in the proportion of older employees³⁹ provides a possible explanation for the slower decrease in reports of age-based discrimination. **Figure 17** shows that employees age 50 and older (those in the categories “50-59” and “60 or older”) have consistently been the most likely to perceive age-based discrimination. The figure also shows a sharp decrease in the percentage of employees who are over age 50 who reported discrimination, which is certainly a positive trend.

Figure 17. Percentage of employees perceiving denial of a job, promotion, or other job benefit on the basis of age, by age group, 1992-2007



³⁹ In 1983, employees age 50 or older accounted for 29 percent of the workforce. By 2007, they accounted for 43 percent of the workforce. Thus, there are now more employees at an age level where they are most likely to report age discrimination.

Other Bases for Discrimination: Disability, Religion, Marital Status, and Political Affiliation

In the 2005 MPS, very few employees—2 percent or less, Governmentwide—reported experiencing discrimination within the past 2 years on the basis of disability, religion, marital status, or political affiliation. However, as shown in **Table 14**, the Governmentwide figures conceal some clear differences across agencies:

Table 14. Percentage of employees perceiving denial of a job, promotion, or other job benefit on selected bases—highest and lowest agency percentages, 2005

Basis	Agency with		
	Highest Percentage	Lowest Percentage	Governmentwide Average
Disability	5.0%	0.8%	2.3%
Religion	2.6%	0.4%	1.1%
Marital status	2.4%	0.6%	1.4%
Political affiliation	2.8%	0.5%	1.4%

The differences across agencies are not large in absolute terms but assume greater significance when viewed in terms of odds. For example, employees in the “highest” agency were more than six times more likely to report experiencing discrimination based on religion than employees in the “lowest” agency.

We caution that these figures reflect differences in perception; they do not necessarily reflect differences in the actual incidence of discrimination. Nevertheless, the figures reinforce two points. First, agencies should not necessarily interpret positive Governmentwide results as endorsements of their own individual cultures and practices. Second, even if these differences merely reflect differences in organizational culture and climate, they provide a tangible reminder of the costs of a poor organizational climate. Organizations with low levels of trust and morale pay a price much greater than a poor showing in “best places to work” rankings. In such organizations, employees may mistrust even the best-intentioned management initiatives and decisions. That will greatly complicate efforts to make constructive changes to work processes and personnel practices, even when such changes would benefit employees. Mistrust also increases the likelihood that employees will attribute personnel decisions to factors such as favoritism and discrimination, and that employees will challenge management decisions informally or formally.

Prohibited Personnel Practices

Discrimination is not the only prohibited personnel practice in the Federal Government. Consistent with the merit principle of fair and open competition, Federal agencies and employees are prohibited from obstructing competition for jobs, giving an unauthorized advantage to any applicant for a job or promotion, and from engaging in nepotism. Seeking to protect both individual employees and the broader public interest, Congress has established legal protections for Federal employees who exercise a right of appeal or complaint or who “blow the whistle” on agency wrongdoing, and has prohibited Federal officials from retaliating against employees or applicants for engaging in such activities. Therefore, the Merit Principles Survey has regularly included items concerning protected activities and prohibited personnel practices to provide measures of the Federal Government’s success in maintaining a workforce free of prohibited personnel practices and creating an environment where employees can disclose wrongdoing without fear of retaliation.

Table 15 shows the items related to prohibited personnel practices that have been used in the MPS since 1983, arranged under 3 aspects: (1) unfair competition—whether an employee has been discouraged from competing for a job or denied a job because competition was circumvented; (2) exercising rights—whether an employee has engaged in a legally protected activity such as disclosing wrongdoing (i.e., whistleblowing) or filing a grievance; and (3) retaliation—whether an employee has been retaliated against for a protected activity.

Table 15. MPS items related to prohibited personnel practices

Aspect	Merit Principles Survey Items
Unfair Competition	<p>In the past 2 years, do you feel you have been—</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Discouraged from competing for a job or promotion by an agency official? ■ Influenced by an agency official to withdraw from competition for a Federal job or promotion in order to help another person’s chances of getting that job or promotion? ■ Denied a job or promotion because one of the selecting or recommending officials gave an unfair advantage to another recipient? ■ Denied a job or promotion because it was given to a relative of a selecting or recommending official?
Exercising Rights	<p>In the past 2 years, have you—</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Made any formal disclosure of fraud, waste, abuse, or unlawful behavior at work? ■ Exercised any formal appeal, complaint, or grievance right?
Retaliation	<p>In the past 2 years, do you feel that you have been retaliated against or threatened with retaliation for—</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Disclosing health and safety dangers, unlawful behavior, and/or fraud, waste, and abuse? ■ Exercising any appeal, complaint, or grievance right? ■ Testifying for or otherwise assisting any individual in the exercise of whistleblowing, equal opportunity, or appeal rights? ■ Refusing to obey an unlawful order? ■ Reporting unwanted sexual attention or sexual harassment? ■ Disagreeing with management decisions?⁴⁰

Unfair Competition

As shown in **Table 16**, the percentage of employees reporting unfair competition has declined over time. In 2007, the percentage of employees who reported experiencing the flagrant prohibited personnel practice of a manager asking an employee to withdraw an application or a manager engaging in nepotism (hiring a relative), was only three percent. However, the apparent rarity of such practices does not mean that employees believe that competition for jobs always takes place on a “level playing field.” In 2007, although decreasing percentages of employees reported inappropriate manipulation of the hiring process, 11 percent of employees reported that they had been discouraged from competing for a job, and 15 percent believed that an unfair advantage had been given to another job applicant.

⁴⁰ Disagreeing with a management policy or decision is not a protected activity.

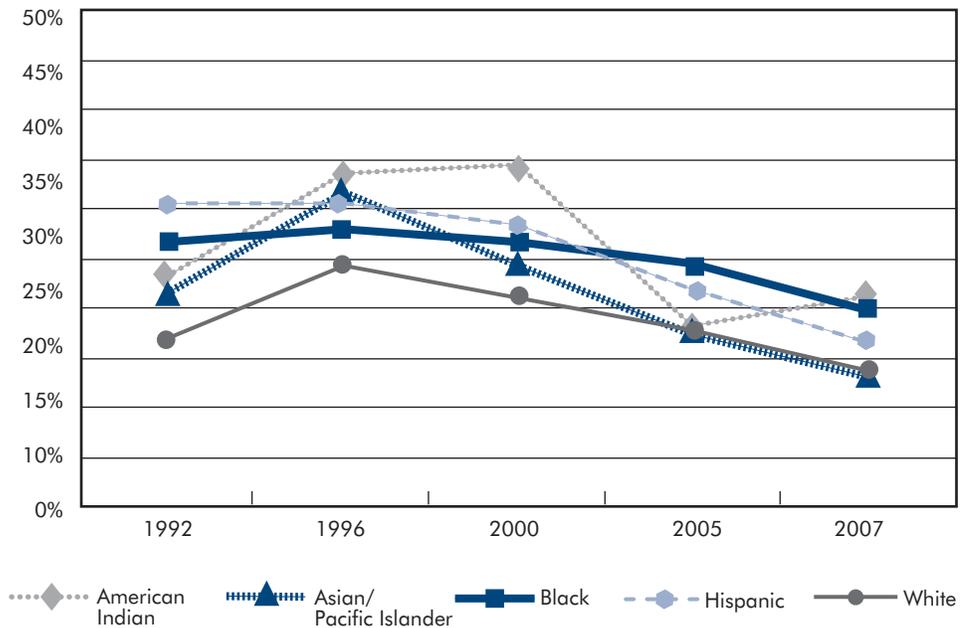
Table 16. Percentage of employees perceiving that they experienced an instance of unfair competition, 1986-2007

Reported Experience	Survey Year						
	1986	1989	1992	1996	2000	2005	2007
Discouraged from competing ⁴¹			16%	18%	14%	12%	11%
Influenced to withdraw	4%	5%	5%	5%	4%	3%	3%
Unfair advantage given to another	28%	30%	19%	25%	22%	19%	15%
Denied a job because of nepotism	6%	6%	4%	5%	4%	3%	3%

Note: The experiences are the experiences described in the MPS items listed under the “unfair competition” aspect in Table 16. The experiences are abbreviated here for readability.

Figure 18 presents the percentage of employees who perceived denial of a job or promotion because an unfair advantage was given to another person. Two patterns of interest are evident from this data. First, among most groups, perceptions of unfairness were higher in 1996 than in 1992. One possible explanation for this increase is a shortage of promotional opportunities during that time.⁴² If this does apply, then agencies should expect hiring processes to come under closer scrutiny—and hiring decisions to be viewed with greater skepticism—when jobs and promotions are scarce.

Figure 18. Percentage of employees perceiving denial of a job or promotion because another applicant was given an unfair advantage, by ethnicity and racial group, 1992-2007



⁴¹ The wording of the MPS item (“discouraged from competing”) is broader than that of the prohibited personnel practice, which is to “deceive or willfully obstruct any person with respect to such person’s right to compete for employment.” (5 U.S.C. Section 2302(b)(4))

⁴² As noted earlier in this report, many Federal agencies were reducing staff during the 1990’s. Permanent full-time Federal employment decreased steadily between 1992 and 2000.

The second pattern of interest is the continuing differences across ethnicity and racial groups. In particular, American Indian and Black employees were more likely to report that they were “passed over” because a position had been filled unfairly. These differences reinforce the importance of openness, not only in terms of advertising opportunities, but in communicating the criteria for advancement and in assuring that employees have equitable access to opportunities, such as training and high-profile work assignments, that can enhance an employee’s chances of promotion. These differences are also a caution against managers relying on informal networks to recruit applicants for jobs or to provide insight into job applicants’ qualifications. Such reliance can disadvantage minority employees if they are not fully represented or included in informal networks.

Exercising Rights and Experiencing Retaliation

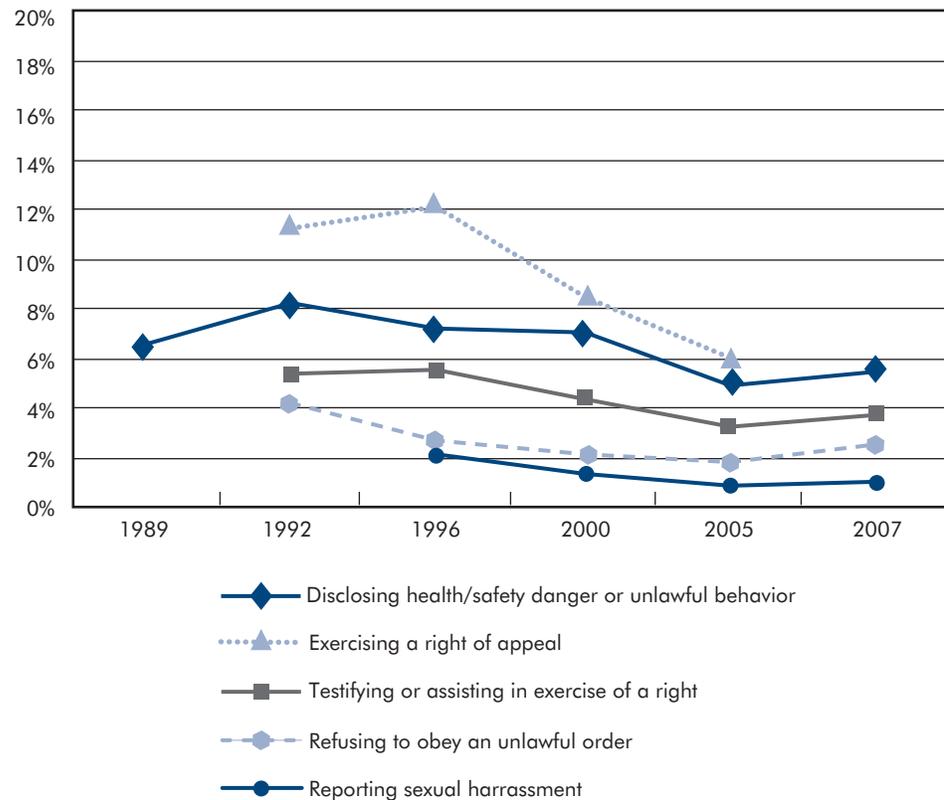
As shown in **Table 17**, relatively few employees exercise formal rights (i.e., file an appeal, complaint, or grievance) or make formal disclosures of Federal Government wrongdoing. The figures for 2005 were slightly lower than those for 2000, but there is no clear evidence of a trend during this period because the differences were so small and represent only two points in time that are fairly close together.

Table 17. Percentage of employees indicating that they engaged in a protected activity, 2000 and 2005

In the past 2 years, have you—	Year	
	2000	2005
Made any formal disclosure of fraud, waste, abuse, or unlawful behavior at work?	6.6%	5.6%
Exercised any formal appeal, complaint, or grievance right?	8.8%	6.7%

Responses to survey items concerning retaliation over the period 1989-2007, illustrated in Figure 18, indicate that employees have become less likely to report experiencing retaliation for engaging in a protected activity. That is a positive development, but closer examination of the data in **Figure 19** is not reassuring.

Figure 19. Percentage of employees perceiving retaliation for engaging in a legally protected activity, by type of activity, 1989-2007



First, the percentage of employees who perceived that they had been retaliated against for engaging in a protected activity was slightly higher in 2007 than in 2005 for all types of activity.⁴³ For reasons outlined previously, we cannot conclude that this change represents a trend or that the differences are significant—but it is still disquieting. Second, response patterns do not reflect positively on how agencies respond to complaints, grievances, or employee disagreement with a management policy or decision. The percentage of employees who reported *retaliation* in 2005 for engaging in a specific protected activity is quite close to the percentage of employees who reported *engaging* in that activity—suggesting that most employees who reported disclosing wrongdoing or filing a grievance believe that they experienced negative repercussions for doing so. Also, in 2007, 13 percent of employees reported retaliation for actively disagreeing with management, which is not a legally protected right.

These results are troubling from several perspectives. Above all, morale, organizational performance, and (ultimately) the public suffer unnecessarily when employees are reluctant to disclose wrongdoing or to seek redress for inequities in the workplace. Furthermore, the legal costs in time, money and various other forms of negative

⁴³ For 2007, survey data on retaliation for exercising a right of appeal were not available because it was not included in the electronic version of the survey.

impacts are significant. As discussed in our report on the 2005 Merit Principles Survey, these results on retaliation suggest that work remains to be done in creating a workplace where employees can raise concerns about organizational priorities, work processes, and personnel policies and decisions without fear of retaliation, and where managers can respond to such concerns openly and constructively.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ See U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *Accomplishing Our Mission: Results of the Merit Principles Survey 2005*, Washington, DC, February 2007, pp. 38-41.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

Twenty-five years of feedback from Federal employees shows that the Federal Government has many strengths as an employer. Employees tend to be highly committed to their jobs and their agencies. Sharp increases in employee satisfaction with their pay suggest that efforts to make Federal pay competitive have made a real difference. A high percentage of Federal employees would also recommend the Federal Government as an employer. Thus, results from the survey bode well for the Government's ability to retain current employees and attract new employees.

Nevertheless, survey results also revealed three broad areas that need improvement. The first area is management of human capital. The Government's need to recruit a new generation of Federal employees must not divert attention from better managing both current and new employees. Many Federal employees continued to report that their skills are not effectively used or maintained. Also, improvements in technical aspects of performance management—such as developing fair and relevant performance standards—have not, thus far, produced widespread employee satisfaction with awards, or high levels of employee confidence that agencies allocate awards based on performance.

The second area for improvement is supervision. The role of Federal supervisors must be better defined to reflect just what agencies expect and demand of their supervisors and the skills of supervisors must be improved. While most employees report satisfaction with their supervisors, being satisfied is not good enough. Employees' opinions of their supervisors' management skills have improved only marginally over the last 20 years. Substantial percentages of employees do not trust their supervisors to exercise personnel authorities (such as rating job applicants and setting pay) wisely and fairly. These results are particularly troubling for agencies that seek to use performance and pay systems to strengthen accountability for performance and results. Employees who have limited confidence in their supervisors and who perceive little, if any, relationship between performance and awards are unlikely to support agency efforts to tie pay more closely to performance.

The third area is fair treatment and trust. Agencies must not only be vigilant against discrimination and retaliation, but attentive to employee perceptions of management initiatives and decisions. The Federal Government has made considerable progress toward achieving a workplace free of discrimination and prohibited personnel

practices. Over time, fewer employees have reported experiencing retaliation and discrimination on bases such as ethnicity and race, gender, and age. Similarly, more employees reported that they are treated fairly in matters such as pay, training, and awards. Nevertheless, there remained considerable employee skepticism about the integrity of agency hiring, promotion, and pay practices. Moreover, there were often considerable differences of opinion across lines of ethnicity and race. Minority employees, Black employees in particular, were less likely to view agency managers and personnel practices positively—and were more likely to report experiencing discrimination or unfair treatment—than were nonminority employees. Perceptions matter, because negative perceptions—even when unwarranted—can seriously undermine morale, organizational performance, and the credibility and effectiveness of even well-intentioned, well-conceived management initiatives.

Fortunately, continued progress in these areas is within the reach of every Federal agency. On almost every survey item that the MSPB has tracked since 1983, the largest differences are by agency, not by categories such as ethnicity and race, gender, occupational category, or supervisory status. Some agency characteristics that shape employee opinions, such as budget, legal environment, clarity and coherence of mission, and public consensus about the agency's mission, cannot be directly controlled by agency leaders. However, agency leaders are not mere bystanders: their leadership, the policies they develop, and the practices they promote (or tolerate), can greatly affect organizational climate, working conditions, and employee opinions.

Progress in these areas requires investment, including a sustained commitment of leadership and resources. Progress also requires patience and persistence: positive change in organizational cultures and complex systems is often frustratingly slow, but worthwhile. Research shows that investing in employees and in the work environment is essential, not just “nice to do.” Employees who are treated fairly, assigned work that is important and challenging, and (just as important) given the training, resources, support, and leadership needed to succeed are much more likely to perform well and to remain with the Federal Government for the right reasons.

These objectives mean that for the Federal Government, being a model employer begins with, and is grounded in, compliance with the merit principles and avoidance of prohibited personnel practices. However, this is not simply a legal mandate; it is also good business. Being a model employer means the Government builds on those high standards embodied in the merit principles, by developing and applying creative and forward-thinking approaches to better achieve efficiency and effectiveness in accomplishment of the Government's mission.

Recommendations

Federal agencies should—

Capitalize on their strengths. Many advantages of Federal employment are well-known: the ability to serve the public and make a difference, the Government’s commitment to fairness, its (comparative) job security, and the enormous variety of careers that agencies offer. Survey results and recent MSPB research highlight other potential, less obvious advantages. These include pay, opportunities for advancement, and capable and committed coworkers. Such strengths can help agencies attract “the best and the brightest” when competing with other employers—but only if they are publicized. Therefore, agencies should emphasize the positive aspects of the Federal employment deal when recruiting, whether through vacancy announcements, advertisements, word-of-mouth, or innovative approaches designed to highlight the benefits of working for a particular agency.

Ensure that they fully use employees’ skills and try to assign them meaningful work. The vast majority of employees believe that their work is important. However, it appears that many employees are underutilized or poorly matched to their jobs: only two-thirds (68 percent) of employees agreed in 2005 that their job makes good use of their skills. Therefore, agencies should work to ensure that all employees are assigned projects and tasks that are both important and, whenever possible, make full use of their skills and abilities. Agencies should also take care to use employees and their talents *efficiently*. Even if employees are assigned important work, bureaucracy and shortcomings in leadership—such as heaping on administrative burdens, excessive levels of review, undue delays in decision making, and unnecessary restrictions on the availability and use of resources—can prevent employees from achieving (and seeing) desired results. That, in turn, may cause employees to believe that agency leaders see their work (and mission accomplishment) as unimportant, leading to reduced employee commitment and motivation.

Ensure that employees receive the support needed to succeed. Federal employees are highly committed, but commitment alone cannot guarantee results. Progress has been made in aligning staff and resources with results, but many employees indicate that they lack the training, resources, or information needed to do their jobs effectively. Agencies should pay particular attention to the long-term maintenance and growth of their human capital: even among employees who reported that their training is adequate to meet immediate needs, many believed that additional training and development would help them perform better.

Continue efforts to strengthen performance management. Agencies have made significant improvements in developing performance standards: approximately two-thirds of employees agreed in 2005 that their performance standards are appropriate. However, agencies have made less progress in the area of accountability: only 40% of employees responded that excellent performance

will be reflected in their pay, and an even smaller percentage (30%) of employees believed that their agencies deal effectively with poor or mediocre performance. Therefore, agencies need to build on their progress in improving performance standards to improve performance measurement, feedback, and recognition. Reliable, credible performance evaluation systems—and supervisors who are willing, competent, and trusted to use those systems fairly and wisely—are critical to further progress.

Improve how they select and develop supervisors. Supervisors are key to effective workforce management, and the importance of good supervisory skills is heightened by changes in Federal human resources systems that give agencies and managers greater discretion in matters such as advancement and pay. However, Federal employees consistently reported that supervisors' technical skills exceed their managerial skills, and they did not hold those managerial skills in especially high regard. Therefore, agencies should select, develop, appraise, and reward supervisors based on supervisory competencies in addition to technical competencies. We recognize that agencies want to promote and reward high-performing employees and that technical competence and credibility are essential to most, if not all, supervisory positions. However, selecting employees for supervisory positions based solely on their technical accomplishments is ill-advised. Technical expertise is a poor indicator of supervisory potential, and technical accomplishments are not a satisfactory substitute for effective supervision.

This does not mean that agencies can, or should, always require candidates to have a successful “track record” in supervision to be placed in a supervisory position. But agencies should, at a minimum, assess and give weight to supervisory potential when filling supervisory positions. And, when an employee is selected based on supervisory potential, agencies should take special care to identify essential supervisory skills, help the employee to acquire and develop those skills, and hold the employee accountable for using those skills on the job.

Define supervisors' roles to emphasize supervisory functions. The gap between supervisors' perceived managerial skills and technical skills is persistent. That suggests that the gap may be caused by factors beyond flawed processes for selecting and training supervisors. In particular, it raises the possibility that agencies expect many supervisors to serve primarily in a technical or administrative capacity—for example, as advisors to senior management, technical experts, and schedulers of work and leave—and reward them for doing so. Such work is necessary and important. However, supervision of employees is demanding. Agencies cannot expect marked improvement in functions such as work planning, information sharing, coaching, performance feedback and measurement, and recognition when supervisors are required to spend much of their time performing technical or staff work. Therefore, agencies should make a clear distinction between *supervisors* and employees whose functions are primarily technical, advisory, or administrative. Agencies should then clearly define supervisors' roles to emphasize the supervisory functions of facilitating work and supporting employees.

Remain vigilant against prohibited personnel practices, discrimination, and practices that undermine the actual or perceived integrity of human resources programs.

Although the percentage of employees reporting violations of the merit principles or instances of prohibited personnel practices has decreased, Federal agencies should seek to further reduce the incidence of illegal behaviors through education, appropriate redress mechanisms, and accountability for employees who abuse personnel authorities, commit prohibited personnel practices, or tolerate such actions.

Agencies should also seek ways to improve employee understanding and perceptions of human resources programs and practices. Survey responses indicate that many employees believed that agencies and managers sometimes behave in ways that comply with the letter, but not the spirit, of the law. As we have noted, a perception of discrimination or unfair treatment is not evidence of actual discrimination or unfairness. Nevertheless, perceptions matter. The harmful effects of negative perceptions of agency managers and human resources practices extend beyond reduced morale and increased complaints and grievances. Perceptions that decision making processes are unfair or biased also undermine the effectiveness of agency human resources programs, from merit promotion to pay for performance. Research shows that employees who perceive organizational processes as opaque or unfair are more likely to attribute outcomes—such as nonselection for a promotion, or a lower-than-anticipated pay raise—to the organization's officials (such as manager's whims) than to their own personal merit (such as skills and performance).⁴⁵ Such attributions, in turn, make it less likely that agency merit promotion programs will encourage employees to develop their skills, or that agency pay for performance incentives will encourage employees to perform at a high level.

To improve perceptions, agencies should be attentive not only to legal compliance, but also to fundamental principles of openness and fairness. That includes clearly communicating the basis for decisions concerning hiring, performance, and pay—and assuring that employees have equitable access to work assignments, training, and information and guidance from their agency leaders. Agencies must also acknowledge, and seek to bridge, differences in background, ethnicity and race, gender, culture, and perspectives. Such differences should not serve as the basis for personnel decisions, but neither should they be ignored. Unacknowledged differences can impede communication, create misunderstandings, and result in perceived or actual unfairness in the workplace.

⁴⁵ Joel Brockner et. al., "Procedural Fairness, Outcome Favorability, and Judgments of an Authority's Responsibility," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, v. 92, No. 6, Washington, DC, November 2007, pp. 1669-1670.

APPENDIX A: MERIT SYSTEM PRINCIPLES

This appendix lists the Federal merit system principles enumerated in Section 2301(b) of title 5, United States Code.

Merit System Principles

- (1) Recruitment should be from qualified individuals from appropriate sources in an endeavor to achieve a work force from all segments of society, and selection and advancement should be determined solely on the basis of relative ability, knowledge, and skills, after fair and open competition which assures that all receive equal opportunity.
- (2) All employees and applicants for employment should receive fair and equitable treatment in all aspects of personnel management without regard to political affiliation, race, color, religion, national origin, sex, marital status, age, or handicapping condition, and with proper regard for their privacy and constitutional rights.
- (3) Equal pay should be provided for work of equal value, with appropriate consideration of both national and local rates paid by employers in the private sector, and appropriate incentives and recognition should be provided for excellence in performance.
- (4) All employees should maintain high standards of integrity, conduct, and concern for the public interest.
- (5) The Federal work force should be used efficiently and effectively.
- (6) Employees should be retained on the basis of adequacy of their performance, inadequate performance should be corrected, and employees should be separated who cannot or will not improve their performance to meet required standards.
- (7) Employees should be provided effective education and training in cases in which such education and training would result in better organizational and individual performance.
- (8) Employees should be—
 - (A) protected against arbitrary action, personal favoritism, or coercion for partisan political purposes, and
 - (B) prohibited from using their official authority or influence for the purpose of interfering with or affecting the result of an election or a nomination for election.
- (9) Employees should be protected against reprisal for the lawful disclosure of information which the employees reasonably believe evidences—
 - (A) a violation of any law, rule, or regulation, or
 - (B) mismanagement, a gross waste of funds, an abuse of authority, or a substantial and specific danger to public health or safety.

APPENDIX B: PROHIBITED PERSONNEL PRACTICES

This appendix summarizes the prohibited personnel practices enumerated in Section 2302(b) of title 5, United States Code (U.S.C.).

Prohibited Personnel Practices

A Federal employee with authority over personnel actions may not:

- (1) Discriminate against an employee or applicant based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, marital status, or political affiliation;
- (2) Solicit or consider any recommendation that is not job-related and based on personal knowledge of the employee or applicant;
- (3) Coerce the political activity of any person;
- (4) Deceive or obstruct any person from competing for employment;
- (5) Influence anyone to withdraw from competition;
- (6) Give an unauthorized preference or advantage to an employee or applicant;
- (7) Give employment advantages to relatives (i.e., nepotism);
- (8) Retaliate against employees or applicants for whistleblowing;
- (9) Retaliate against employees or applicants for filing an appeal, complaint, or grievance;
- (10) Discriminate based on personal conduct which is not job-related;
- (11) Violate veterans' preference requirements; or
- (12) Violate merit principles as stated in Section 2301(b) of title 5, United States Code.

APPENDIX C: MERIT PRINCIPLES SURVEY ITEMS BY GROUP

This appendix provides, by group (topic), a list of the Merit Principles Survey items that appeared in two or more surveys and that are discussed in this report. Items are shown as they appeared in the 2005 Merit Principles Survey, unless otherwise indicated. In some instances, we have made minor changes to the item's punctuation or format for readability.

1. Job Satisfaction

- In general, I am satisfied with my job.
- My job makes good use of my skills and abilities.
- I know what is expected of me on the job.
- The work I do is meaningful to me.
- I receive the training I need to perform my job.
- I need more training to perform my job effectively.
- I have the resources to do my job well.
- My work unit has a sufficient number of employees to do its job. (MPS 2000)
- I am treated with respect at work.
- My opinions count at work.
- I would recommend the Government as a place to work.
- I would recommend my agency as a place to work.

2. Satisfaction With the Supervisor

- My supervisor has good technical skills.
- My supervisor has good management skills.
- My supervisor keeps me informed about how well I am doing.
- My supervisor looks out for the personal welfare of members of my work unit. (MPS 2000)
- My supervisor deals effectively with poor performers.
- In my work unit, steps are taken to deal with a poor performer who cannot or will not improve. (MPS 2000)
- Overall, I am satisfied with my supervisor.
- Overall, I am satisfied with the managers above my immediate supervisor.
- Information is shared freely in my work unit.
- A spirit of cooperation and teamwork exists in my work unit.
- Recognition and rewards are based on performance in my work unit.

3. Compensation, Recognition, and Fairness

- If I perform well, it is likely I will receive a cash award or pay increase.
- I am satisfied with the recognition and awards I receive for my work.
- Overall, I am satisfied with my pay.
- In the past 2 years, to what extent do you believe you have been treated fairly regarding the following...Career advancement?
- In the past 2 years, to what extent do you believe you have been treated fairly regarding the following...Awards?
- In the past 2 years, to what extent do you believe you have been treated fairly regarding the following...Training?
- In the past 2 years, to what extent do you believe you have been treated fairly regarding the following...Performance appraisals?
- In the past 2 years, to what extent do you believe you have been treated fairly regarding the following...Job assignments?
- In the past 2 years, to what extent do you believe you have been treated fairly regarding the following...Discipline?
- In the past 2 years, to what extent do you believe you have been treated fairly regarding the following...Pay?
- The standards used to appraise my performance are appropriate.
- To what extent do you think your supervisor will exercise each of the following authorities in a fair and effective manner...Rating the qualifications of applicants for jobs?
- To what extent do you think your supervisor will exercise each of the following authorities in a fair and effective manner...Selecting people for vacancies or promotions based on their qualifications?
- To what extent do you think your supervisor will exercise each of the following authorities in a fair and effective manner...Setting individual employees' pay within broad pay bands?
- To what extent do you think your supervisor will exercise each of the following authorities in a fair and effective manner...Taking adverse actions such as suspensions and removals?

4. Discrimination

- In the past 2 years, do you feel you have been denied a job, promotion, pay, or other job benefit because of unlawful discrimination based on...Race/national origin?
- In the past 2 years, do you feel you have been denied a job, promotion, pay, or other job benefit because of unlawful discrimination based on...Sex?
- In the past 2 years, do you feel you have been denied a job, promotion, pay, or other job benefit because of unlawful discrimination based on...Age?
- In the past 2 years, do you feel you have been denied a job, promotion, pay, or other job benefit because of unlawful discrimination based on...Disability?
- In the past 2 years, do you feel you have been denied a job, promotion, pay, or other job benefit because of unlawful discrimination based on...Religion?
- In the past 2 years, do you feel you have been denied a job, promotion, pay, or other job benefit because of unlawful discrimination based on...Marital status?
- In the past 2 years, do you feel you have been denied a job, promotion, pay, or other job benefit because of unlawful discrimination based on...Political affiliation?

5. Prohibited Personnel Practices

- In the past 2 years, do you feel you have been...Discouraged from competing for a job or promotion by an agency official?
- In the past 2 years, do you feel you have been...Influenced by an agency official to withdraw from competition for a Federal job or promotion in order to help another person's chances of getting that job or promotion?
- In the past 2 years, do you feel you have been...Denied a job or promotion because one of the selecting or recommending officials gave an unfair advantage to another recipient?
- In the past 2 years, do you feel you have been...Denied an award based on favoritism by the nominating or approving officials?
- In the past 2 years, do you feel you have been retaliated against or threatened with retaliation for...Disclosing health and safety dangers, unlawful behavior, and/or fraud, waste, and abuse?
- In the past 2 years, do you feel you have been retaliated against or threatened with retaliation for...Exercising any appeal, complaint, or grievance right?
- In the past 2 years, do you feel you have been retaliated against or threatened with retaliation for...Testifying for or otherwise assisting any individual in the exercise of whistleblowing, equal opportunity, or appeal rights?
- In the past 2 years, do you feel you have been retaliated against or threatened with retaliation for...Refusing to obey an unlawful order?
- In the past 2 years, do you feel you have been retaliated against or threatened with retaliation for...Reporting unwanted sexual attention or sexual harassment?
- In the past 2 years, do you feel you have been retaliated against or threatened with retaliation for...Disagreeing with management decisions?
- In the past 2 years, have you been...Pressured into participating in political activities? (MPS 2007)
- In the past 2 years, do you feel you have been pressured by an agency official... To retaliate or take action in favor of another Federal Employee or applicant for political reasons? (MPS 2000)
- In the past 2 years, do you feel you have been...Denied a job or promotion because it was given to a relative of a selecting or recommending official?
- In the past 2 years, have you exercised any formal appeal, complaint, or grievance right?
- In the past 2 years, have you made any formal disclosure of fraud, waste, abuse, or unlawful behavior at work?

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Perspectives from 25 Years of the Merit Principles Survey