

TO RESTORE

Now is the time to rebuild the federal public service.

The terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on Sept. 11 reminded the nation just how important the federal public service is in times of crisis. The night after the attacks, President Bush said, "the functions of our government continue without interruption. Federal agencies in Washington . . . will be open for business tomorrow."

In the days and weeks following the attacks, it became clear that not only would government be open, it would take on a greatly expanded role. Almost immediately, Congress and the Bush administration agreed on a \$40 billion spending package to fund recovery efforts and beef up the defense, intelligence and security agencies. The major airlines called for the federal government to take over security at the nation's airports. The Bush administration created a Cabinet-level Office of Homeland Security and members of Congress began pushing for it to become a full

Cabinet department with a hefty budget and wide responsibilities. Commentators across the political spectrum acknowledged that the United States was entering a long-term crisis in which the size and capacity of the federal establishment needed to grow.

In order to serve the nation during times of crisis or calm, a healthy public service must pass five tests: It should be motivated by the public good, recruited from the top of the labor market, given the tools to sustain high performance, be rewarded for a job well done and be trusted by the people it serves. By these measures, the federal public service is at risk.

The challenges facing the public service are evident in a first-of-its-kind telephone survey of 1,051 federal employees contacted at home by Princeton Survey Research Associates on behalf of the Brookings Institution's Center for Public Service, which the author directs. Given a rare chance to talk candidly about their work without a supervisor looking

over their shoulders, these federal employees describe a civil service with both strengths and vulnerabilities.

The survey clearly shows that the federal workforce has a core of deeply committed employees who serve the public with pride:

■ The vast majority of federal employees are proud to tell their families and friends that they work for the federal government, describe their organizations as being trusted and are largely satisfied with the public respect for the type of work they are doing.

■ Half of federal employees say their organizations are very good at helping people, and substantial majorities say their organizations are either very or somewhat good at running their programs and delivering services, being fair in their decisions and spending money wisely.

■ The majority of federal employees say they are given a chance to do the things they do best, can describe how their job contributes to their organization's mission and believe they are personally contributing a great deal to that mission.

■ Substantial majorities of federal employees say the people they work with are open to new ideas, willing to help other employees learn new skills and concerned about helping achieve their organization's mission.

Unfortunately, these positive views are tainted by persistent perceptions that the federal government does not give its employees the tools to do their jobs well:

■ Substantial minorities say their organizations do not have enough access to information, technological equipment and training, and a majority believe their organizations do not have enough employees to do their jobs well.

■ Four out of 10 federal employees rate the morale in their agencies as somewhat or

By Paul C. Light

ABOUT THE SURVEY

This report is based on a nationwide, representative telephone survey of 1,051 federal government workers and 500 private sector employees, conducted under the direction of Princeton Survey Research Associates (PSRA) and led by PSRA Vice President Mary McIntosh. Interviewing was conducted between Feb. 7 and June 1, 2001. The interviews averaged 20 minutes in length, and interviewers made up to 20 calls to each sampled respondent to attempt to complete an interview.

PSRA interviewed federal workers across the workforce: 177 Senior Executive Service (SES) members; 107 Presidential Management Interns (PMIs); 213 General Schedule managers and supervisors; and 554 GS employees. Most of the PMIs came from the classes of 1997, 1998 and 1999. Likewise, PSRA interviewed

247 private business managers and supervisors and 253 private rank-and-file employees. The total federal government and private business samples were weighted to reflect the actual proportion of managers and nonmanagers in each sector.

For results based on the total sample of federal workers the margin of error is ± 3 percent. The margin of error for federal worker subsamples is ± 9 percent for PMIs; ± 7 percent for the SES; ± 7 percent for GS managers; and ± 4 percent for GS employees. For results based on the total sample of for-profit business workers, the margin of error is ± 4 percent. Sampling errors, variations in how questions are asked and practical difficulties in conducting a survey by telephone can all introduce error or bias into the findings.

AND RENEW



very low. Almost half say that their job performance has little or no bearing on their chances for promotion.

■ Three out of five federal employees describe the hiring process in their organizations as confusing, four out of five call it slow and a quarter say it is not fair. One-third of employees also complain that their organizations do not do a good job of either attracting or retaining talented employees.

■ One-third of federal employees say they are dissatisfied with the opportunities for advancement, not because they do not have the skills or credentials needed for

promotion, but either because they see little room at the top for career civil servants or because they believe the system for advancement is not fair.

■ Federal employees say a quarter of their peers are not performing their jobs well. One-fifth of federal employees blame that poor performance on a lack of training, nearly one-third say that the poor performers are not qualified for their jobs, and almost two in five say their organizations are not asking enough of employees.

Federal employees also blame Congress and the President for much of what ails the government. Two out of five say the Pres-

ident generally acts in ways that worsen the management of their organization, and three out of five say the same of Congress. Employees also have little good to say about the Clinton administration's reinventing government effort. Nearly one-half of those who say their organizations have been reinvented in the past five years said the changes made their jobs more difficult to perform.

Despite these frustrations, the federal workforce fares pretty well in comparison with the private sector. The matched sample of private employees also interviewed for this report were more likely than the federal employees to have joined their organizations for the pay and security, and more likely to come to work each day for the salary, not the nature of the work or a desire to serve the public good.

The private sector gives its employees three distinct advantages over government employees in doing their jobs, however. First, workers in private firms are more likely than federal employees to view their senior leaders and mid-level managers as competent. Second, private employees are more likely to say their organizations have the resources and the employees to do their jobs well. And third, private employees believe their organizations are better at hiring, retaining and promoting talented employees and disciplining poor performers.

Overall, the survey suggests that the federal government has a much better workforce than it deserves. It does too little both to support its best employees and to discipline its poor performers. It spends too much time experimenting with the latest management fads and too little providing the information, technology, training and staff needed to achieve the government's mission. In short, it asks too many of its employees to do the nearly impossible day after day.

WHY THEY JOINED

The first and perhaps most important characteristic of a healthy public service

is that its members are motivated first and foremost by the public good. To the extent the federal government builds a hiring and promotion process that rewards longevity over performance, however, it will tend to attract employees whose first concern is job security.

day?” 32 percent of survey respondents say they are motivated solely by the pay and compensation, 30 percent by the nature of the work, 15 percent by the work ethic, 5 percent by the common good, 3 percent by the chance to be with co-workers and friends and 17 percent by a combination

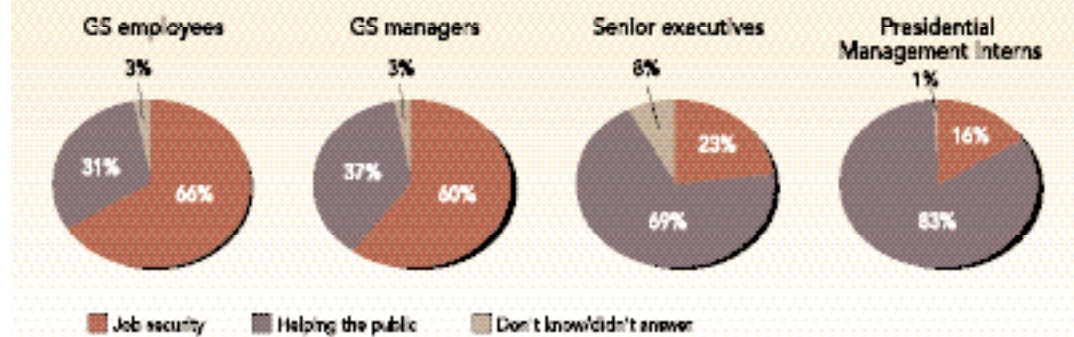
lower-paying jobs or the ones constantly targeted for outsourcing and downsizing.

Once again, it is important to note that federal employees are less security conscious in their daily work than private employees. Private employees are almost half again as likely to say they come to work for the

compensation than federal employees, and less likely to focus on the nature of the job and the work ethic.

A CALL TO JOB SECURITY

Reasons given for deciding to go to work in government:



That appears to be the case among many federal employees. When asked why they took their first job in government, federal employees focus largely on security. Given pairs of possible explanations to consider, 59 percent say a secure paycheck was a more important reason for joining government than doing something worthwhile, 65 percent say job security was more important than helping the public and 66 percent say job security was more important than pride in the organization they joined.

Not all employees say they came to government for security, however. Of the four major groups covered in the survey—members of the Senior Executive Service, General Schedule managers, General Schedule employees and Presidential Management Interns—SESers and PMIs are much more likely to say helping the public, the opportunity to make a difference, doing something worthwhile and pride in their organizations were the reasons for taking their first jobs in government.

WHY THEY STAY

Having entered government for different reasons, the four groups have very different motivations for staying put. When asked, “Why do you come to work every

of some or all of the above.

When separated into the four groups, however, the SESers and PMIs are much more likely than GS managers and employees to be motivated by the chance to accomplish something worthwhile, by pride in their organizations and by the common good and are much less likely to focus on pay and compensation. Forty-four percent of GS employees and 25 percent of GS managers say they come to work every day either solely or partly for the pay and compensation, compared with 20 percent of PMIs and just 13 percent of SESers. Conversely, 36 percent of PMIs and 20 percent of SESers come to work either solely or partly for the common good, compared with just 9 percent of GS employees and 17 percent of GS managers.

The PMIs emerge as the most idealistic group of employees in the federal workforce, in part because they are nominated for the prestigious program based on their commitment to public service. GS employees emerge as the group most concerned about job security, in part because they are the lowest-paid workers in the sample. It is easier to care about the common good when you are fresh out of graduate school than when you work in the

employees as a whole say they can very easily describe how their jobs contribute to their organizations’ missions, and 55 percent believe they personally contribute a great deal to helping accomplish their organizations’ missions.

On the other hand, significant gaps exist between the four groups. Eighty-four percent of SESers, 78 percent of GS managers and 72 percent of PMIs say they know how their jobs contribute to their organizations’ missions, compared with 61 percent of GS employees. In turn, 71 percent of SESers and 66 percent of GS managers say they contribute a great deal to accomplishing those missions, compared with 54 percent of GS employees and, surprisingly, only 37 percent of PMIs. They may come to work in the morning to make a difference for their country, but PMIs appear to leave at the end of the day frustrated by their inability to do so.

These divisions among the various levels of government occur throughout the survey:

Only 32 percent of GS employees and PMIs say they have a lot of say over what happens in their jobs, compared with 63 percent of GS managers and 81 percent of SESers.

MISSION MOTIVATION

Whatever their primary motivation for coming to work each day, the key question for a healthy public service is whether employees care about their organizations’ missions. On the one hand, 63 percent of federal em-

When asked whether their organizations encourage employees to take risks or try new ways of doing their work, 43 percent of GS employees and 51 percent of PMIs answer not much or not at all, compared with 26 percent of GS managers and 20 percent of SESers.

When asked whether their co-workers are open to new ideas, 19 percent of GS employees and 21 percent of PMIs say not much or not at all, compared with 9 percent of GS managers and 3 percent of SESers.

Nearly one-quarter of GS employees and PMIs strongly or somewhat agree that their work is boring, compared with one-tenth of GS managers and about one-twentieth of SESers. GS employees are twice as likely as GS managers and three times as likely as SESers to describe their jobs as dead-end positions with no future.

Simply put, many lower-level federal employees do not feel they could contribute to their organization's mission even if they wanted to. While 60 percent of GS employees say their jobs allow them to make a lot of decisions on their own, only 32 percent say they have a lot of say over what happens in their jobs. In contrast, 88 percent of SESers say their jobs allow them to make a lot of decisions, while 81 percent say they have a lot of say over what happens in their jobs. Despite the rhetoric about empowerment of employees in the reinventing government and total quality management reforms of the Clinton administration and the first Bush administration, many lower-level employees do not believe they have the full authority to do their jobs.

'SHOW ME THE WORK'

The survey results suggest a simple path toward making entry-level federal jobs more attractive to the nation's most talented citizens: Focus on the mission, not the security. Despite their clear commitment to making a difference when they joined gov-

ernment, the PMIs interviewed believe they are not contributing in tangible ways to the mission of their organizations. Far too many are bored by their work and believe that they are not given a chance to do the things they do best. These findings help explain why retention rates among re-

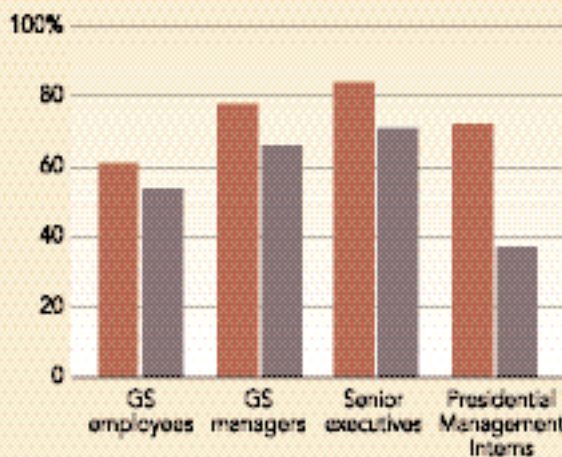
the most satisfied in all categories, and GS managers fall in between the other groups. All four groups, though, see significant morale problems in government. Overall, 41 percent of those surveyed say the morale of the people they work with is either somewhat or very low.

Statistically speaking, it is impossible to determine what is causing the low morale. It could be the product of the constant reinvention, sporadic hiring, pay freezes and pressure to contract out more and more civil service jobs. It also could be the product of the Bush administration's proposal this year to give federal civilians a smaller pay raise than military personnel would get, thus breaking with the long tradition of pay parity between the two workforces. But whatever the reason, there is no question that a substantial number of federal employees believe their colleagues are wearing out.

ON A MISSION

Percentage of civil servants who say:

They can very easily describe how their job contributes to mission
They contribute a great deal to mission



cent PMIs are falling. According to a recent Merit Systems Protection Board study, 69 percent of PMIs recruited from 1982 to 1989 were still in government after three years, compared with 59 percent of the PMIs recruited from 1990 to 1994. If the trends hold, less than half of the PMIs who entered government in the fall of 2001 will still be there in 2006.

Just 36 percent of PMIs believe their jobs allow them to make a lot of decisions on their own, and even fewer (32 percent) say they have a lot of say over what happens in their jobs. That's not the kind of frustration that higher pay, student loan forgiveness and better job advertisements will solve. They are not saying "show me the money," but "show me the work."

Given these patterns, it should not be surprising that the four groups surveyed have different levels of job satisfaction. GS employees are the least satisfied with their jobs overall. PMIs are the least satisfied with their pay and benefits. SESers are

THE TALENT WAR

The second characteristic of a healthy public service is that it aims for the top of the labor market when it hires new employees, not just for the top of the pool that happens to be available. A healthy public service recruits aggressively, pays competitively and provides the kind of work that talented Americans want.

While all segments of the public service—federal, state and local—need to promote themselves better, the federal service has the biggest mountain to climb.

Asked which careers offer the greatest potential for their children and students, only 11 percent of parents and 24 percent of high school teachers interviewed for a Harris Poll in June 2000 said government was the place to go. Fifty percent of the parents and 75 percent of the teachers put high-tech careers at the top, followed by education, health care, finance, law, entertainment, retail, construction, manufacturing, social services and agriculture.

Only 41 percent of 2,600 14- to 29-year-olds interviewed by Princeton Survey Re-

search Associates in 1998 said that government is a good place to start their careers. Of those who did, local government was the destination of choice by a margin of more than 2-to-1 over the federal government.

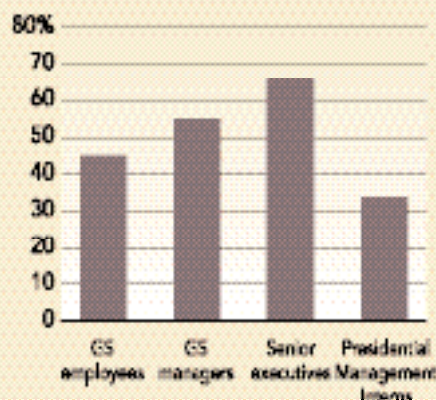
■ The federal government is running dead last as the destination of choice for graduates of the nation's top public policy and administration graduate schools. Three-fourths of the classes of 1973 and 1974 went to government for their first jobs, compared with just 49 percent of the class of 1993—and the federal government lagged behind the state and local sectors within the government category. Equally troubling, five years into their first jobs, students from the classes of 1973 and 1974 were much more likely to still be in government than were students from the class of 1993.

Unfortunately for government, today's labor market rewards rapid advancement and the acquisition of skills and challenging work, not loyalty or endurance. Yet nearly a third of federal employees are not satisfied with opportunities for advancement, and one-fifth feel the same about the opportunity to develop new skills.

The federal government has one advantage over the private sector, however. It has a distinguished record of endeavor and can claim great success in a host of areas

GIVING THEIR ALL

Percentage who strongly agree they get the chance to do what they do best:



that call young Americans to service today. To the extent that talented citizens are motivated not only by the opportunity to join in the fight against terrorism but to tackle other tough, important problems such as protecting the environment, ensuring civil rights, providing health care to the elderly, promoting international trade and reducing disease, the federal government is the place to be. (Go to www.brookings.edu/endeavors for a list

of the federal government's greatest achievements of the past 50 years.)

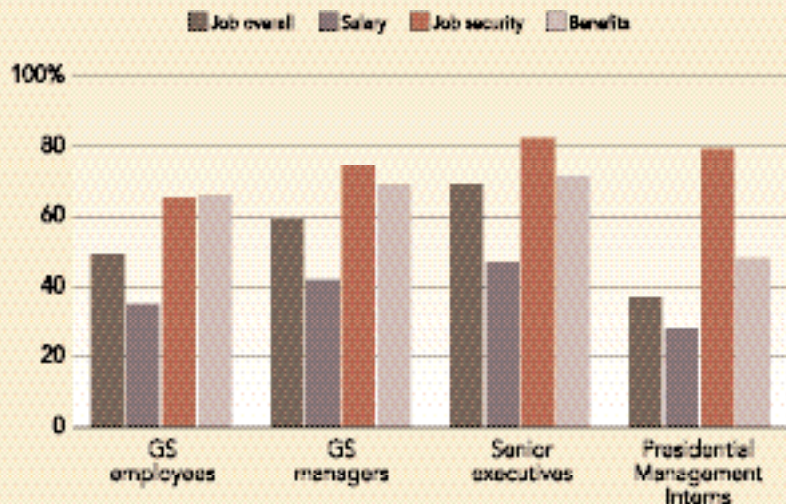
The problem is that federal agencies do little, if anything, to advertise the rewards of public service. The Council for Excellence in Government reports that stereotypes of government employees as idiots have ebbed recently with the exit of bumbling sitcom characters, such as the sneaky postal worker Newman on NBC's "Seinfeld," and the arrival of competent government officials on new programs, such as NBC's "The West Wing." But only the armed services have sustained advertising campaigns that celebrate the benefits of public service.

The federal government is particularly inept in advertising its jobs. A surprisingly large number of openings are never posted publicly. According to a 1999 study by the Office of Personnel Management, as many as one-third of all job openings are not publicly announced, let alone posted on the agency's USAJOBS Web site (www.usajobs.opm.gov). And when jobs are posted, agencies often use advertisements that are nearly unintelligible.

Once government finds a willing recruit, it is also notoriously slow in hiring him or her. Asked to choose among adjectives that describe the hiring process, the vast majority of federal employees say the process is both confusing and slow. By comparison, private employees say their hiring systems are faster, simpler and fairer. So much for the notion that slowness is somehow integral to fairness.

SOMEWHAT SATISFIED

Percentage very satisfied with:



STANDING STILL

The federal hiring process has created a slight but undeniable long-term decline in the overall quality of the federal workforce. Overall, 31 percent of federal employees say the quality of the senior people in their organizations has declined over the past few years. Forty-two percent say it has stayed the same and 24 percent say it has increased. The perceived erosion continues throughout the hierarchy, where 22 percent say the quality of middle level managers has decreased, 52 percent say it has stayed the same and 24 percent say it has increased. (It is important to note that federal employees

Continued on page 42

FEDERAL VS. PRIVATE: Whose workforce is better?

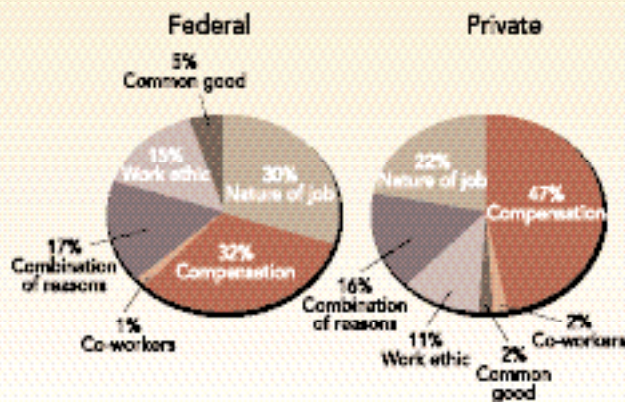
To find out how the federal workforce really stacks up against the private sector, Princeton Survey Research Associates polled both groups earlier this year. So who's better? It depends on what you're measuring.

Uncle Sam clearly has the more motivated workforce. A little more than 30 percent of federal employees say their main motivation in coming to work every day is to pick up a paycheck, but almost half of private employees say money is the motivat-

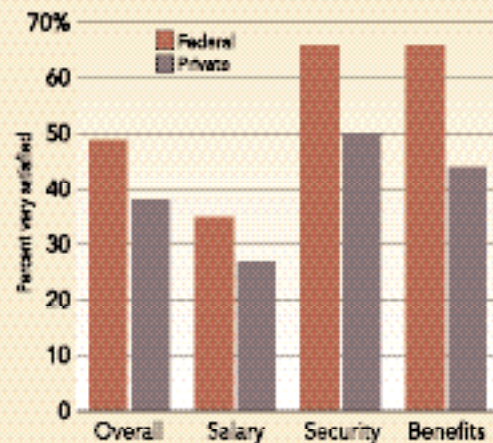
ing factor. Private sector workers are less happy with their work, salary and benefits than their federal counterparts, and they don't think they have as much opportunity to accomplish something worthwhile.

On the other hand, private sector employees have better things to say about their organizations' hiring systems, calling them fast, simple and fair. Government

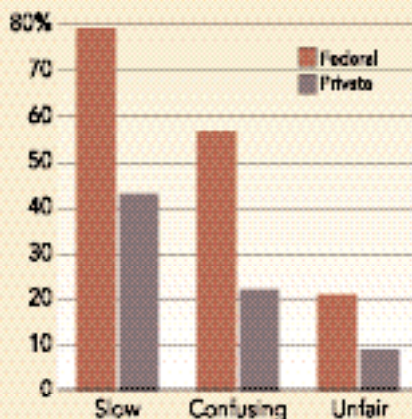
WHY DO YOU COME TO WORK?



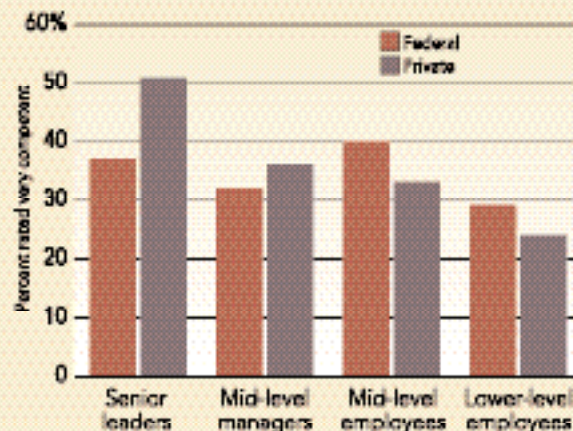
HOW SATISFIED ARE YOU?



HOW'S YOUR HIRING PROCESS?



ARE EMPLOYEES AT ALL LEVELS COMPETENT?



employees describe the federal hiring process as slow, confusing and unjust.

Private sector employees clearly have a higher opinion of their senior leaders than federal employees do. And while federal and private sector employees are equally satisfied with their opportunities to advance and develop new skills, private sector workers consistently report a higher

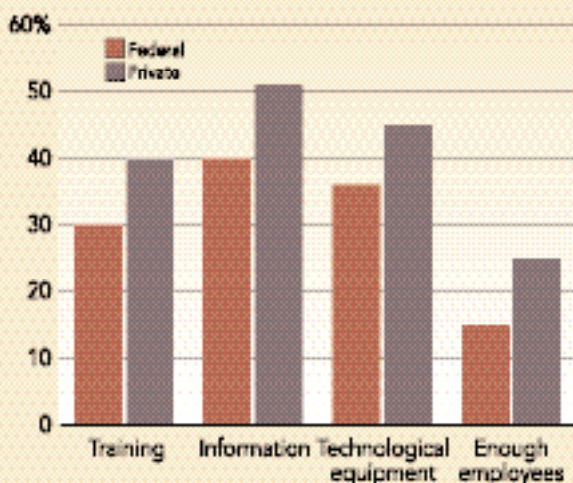
level of support from their organizations.

Both federal workers and those in the private sector have survived their share of management reform efforts in recent years. But private sector employees say they have been “reformed” less frequently—and that the efforts have had a much more positive impact.

Surprisingly, federal and private sector

employees estimate almost identical numbers of poor performers in their midst—roughly 25 percent. But private sector employees are far less likely than federal employees to say that their employers don’t ask enough of poor performers. And they are much more likely to say their organizations do a good job of disciplining those who don’t measure up.

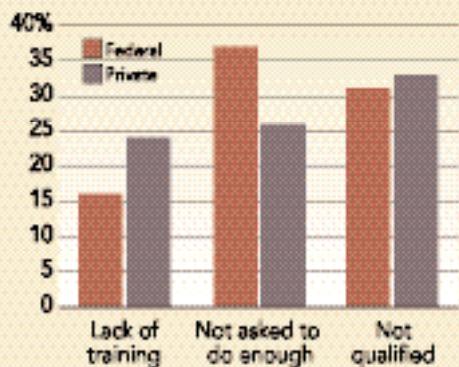
DO YOU GET THE RESOURCES YOU NEED?



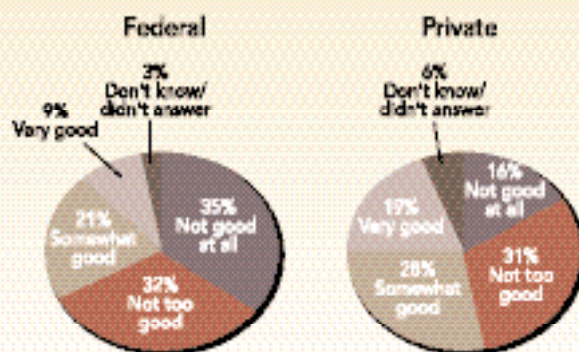
HAVE REFORM EFFORTS WORKED?



WHY DO EMPLOYEES PERFORM POORLY?



HOW IS YOUR DISCIPLINARY SYSTEM?



Continued from page 36 were not asked about political and career leaders as separate groups because the survey was designed for use across the public and private sectors.)

Although private employees say there have been similar declines in the quality of their workforces, especially at lower levels, the private sector is not facing the huge re-

anger at the polls, including that of the growing ranks of federal retirees who will be calling Social Security offices and getting busy signals.

LACK OF SUPPORT

The third characteristic of a healthy public service is that it has the tools and re-

the harshest toward their organizations, with just 10 percent saying that their organizations always provide needed training.

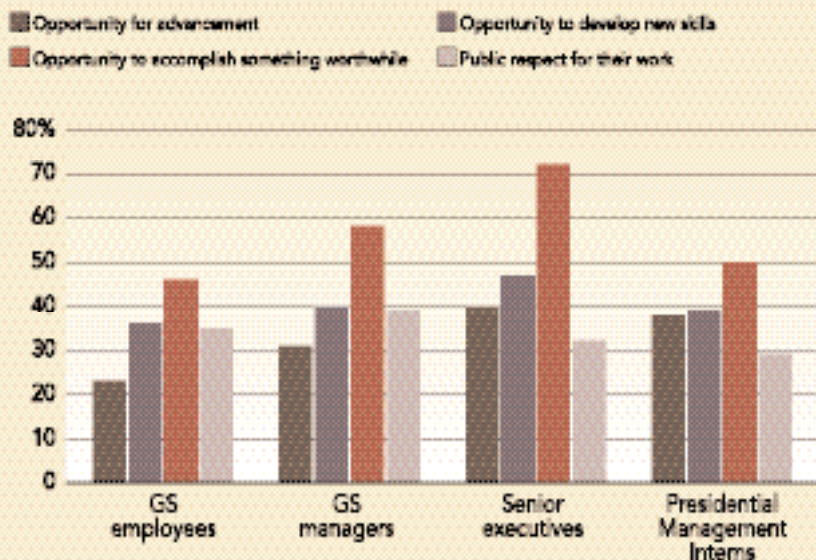
Federal organizations do much better on providing access to information and basic technological equipment. Three-quarters of federal employees say their organizations always or often provide the information needed to do their jobs well, and 70 percent say the same about technology. If there is a digital divide between the top and bottom of government, these employees do not see it: 70 percent of GS employees, 71 percent of SESers and 72 percent of GS managers say their organizations always or often provide the technological equipment to do their jobs well. Only the PMIs offer complaints, in part because their assignments sometimes involve rotations from office to office—which may leave them with more limited access to effective technology—and in part because they may have higher standards for the kinds of technology necessary to do their jobs.

But staffing is where federal employees find the greatest fault with their organizations—and no wonder. The federal government has spent the last 15 years trying to cut its civilian workforce, and President Bush began his administration by implementing the 36th hiring freeze of the past half century. Although these hiring restrictions were later lifted, the administration has dedicated itself to putting tens of thousands of federal jobs up for competition with the private sector.

There are many good reasons to outsource federal work, not the least of which are the faster, leaner hiring systems in the private sector that allow agencies to procure needed talent immediately. Nevertheless, research on the true size of government suggests that the number of service contractors has grown by roughly 500,000 jobs to 4 million over the past 15 years, even as the federal civilian workforce has declined by more than 400,000, to 1.8 million. It is not clear whether these numbers reflect a job-for-job switch, in part because the executive branch has never been asked to track the movement. What is clear is that many federal employees now work side by side with contract employees who are doing

WORTH STAYING FOR

Percentage very satisfied with:



tirement wave that now confronts the federal government. The Congressional Budget Office reports that three-quarters of the federal workforce is older than 40, compared with just half of all employed workers in the United States. One-third of all federal employees will be eligible for retirement by 2005, with even heavier concentrations in high-impact agencies such as the Social Security Administration, where ordinary attrition and retirement will create vacancies in well over half of the front-line jobs upon which America's retirees depend.

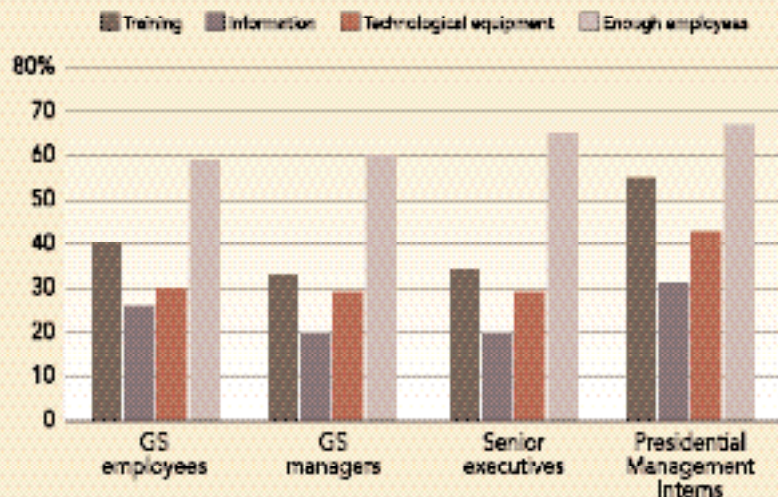
Congress has ample incentive to address the retirement crisis. If there is one truth in American politics, it is that front-line service matters to congressional fortunes. To the extent Congress and the President temporize about the problems in recruiting and retaining a talented workforce, they will likely feel the sting of voter

sources to sustain and achieve high performance. Highly motivated, talented employees can succeed for only so long without organizational support, nor will they stay long in organizations that refuse to provide the tools, technologies, training and structures that allow them to grow. Unfortunately, by almost every indicator, the federal government does not give its 1.8 million civil servants the resources to do their jobs well. Far too many federal employees succeed in spite of their organizations.

Although most federal employees are either very satisfied (36 percent) or somewhat satisfied (42 percent) with the opportunities they get to develop new skills, 40 percent say the organizations in which they work only sometimes or rarely provide access to the training they need to do their jobs well. Once again, PMIs were

LACKING THE BASICS

Percentage who say their organization only sometimes or rarely provides access to:



jobs once performed by civil servants.

What is also clear is that federal employees do not believe their organizations have enough employees to do their jobs well. Overall, only 15 percent of those surveyed say their organizations always have enough employees, 25 percent say often, 34 percent say sometimes and 25 percent say rarely. The complaints cut across the four employee groups, with PMIs only slightly more likely than their colleagues to perceive a staffing problem in their organizations.

Complaints about resources are not unique to the federal workforce. Private employees also complain about access to information, technology, training and under-staffing. But they are consistently less likely to complain than federal employees are, particularly about staffing. Whereas 59 percent of federal employees say their organizations sometimes or rarely have enough employees to do their jobs well, only 41 percent of private employees agree. This finding may help explain why private employees are more likely than federal employees to see their senior leadership as both competent and improving.

It may also explain why federal employees have little good to say about Congress or the President. Sixty percent of federal civil servants say Congress generally

acts in ways that worsen the management of their organizations, and 41 percent say the same of the President.

On the whole, 94 percent of federal employees believe they are able to accomplish something worthwhile at work, compared with 88 percent of private employees. But only 25 percent of federal employees say they trust their organizations to do the right thing just about always, compared with 35 percent of private employees.

RATING REFORMS

Achieving and sustaining high performance requires an organizational structure that allows innovations to move easily upward and that calls for accountability for what goes right and wrong to be placed on the right levels and employees. Accountability is nearly impossible, however, in organizations that 40 percent of federal employees describe as having too many layers—a percentage nearly twice as high as that of private sector respondents.

Accountability is also nearly impossible in organizations that are constantly reforming themselves to keep up with the latest management fads. Just as too little reform can breed complacency, too much can create turmoil and uncertainty.

Federal employees believe the reinvent-

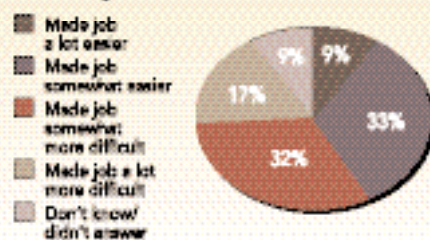
ing government efforts of the last five years have failed. Of the 73 percent who report that their organizations have been reformed or reinvented in the last five years, 49 percent say that the changes have made their jobs either somewhat or a lot more difficult. The most damage was at the lower levels of government, where 50 percent of GS employees say reinvention made their jobs more difficult, while the greatest returns came at the higher levels, where 60 percent of SESers report easier jobs in the wake of reinvention. So much for reinvention's promise of empowerment and efficiency on the front lines of government.

When asked more specifically about the major areas of reform that have dominated the federal arena over the past decade, SESers and high-level employees with at least 10 years of experience give low marks to several key reinvention initiatives. Just 39 percent, for example, say the effort to measure government results has been very or somewhat successful, and only 43 percent give positive ratings to attempts by agencies to reduce their internal rules. Fifty percent say the movement to improve financial management has shown success, and a little more than half say the same about streamlining procurement regulations.

Efforts not directly tied to reinventing government scored higher. Nearly 90 percent of high-ranking officials say the government's effort to improve information technology has been very or somewhat successful, and 67 percent say attempts to reduce fraud, waste and abuse in federal programs have achieved success.

REJECTING REINVENTION

Reactions to the crusade to reinvent government:



HITS AND MISSES

How Senior Executive Service members and managers at the GS 13-15 levels with at least 10 years of experience rate recent government reform efforts:

	Very or somewhat successful	Not too successful or not successful at all
Improve information technology	88%	11%
Reduce fraud, waste and abuse	67%	21%
Streamline procurement	54%	29%
Improve financial management	50%	38%
Reduce internal rules	43%	49%
Measure government results	39%	58%

The unenviable track record of reinventing government may help explain two seemingly contradictory findings from the survey. As already noted, federal employees do not believe their organizations encourage them to take risks. Nor do they believe that the word “innovative” describes their organizations very well. But, the vast majority of employees also believe that their fellow workers are willing to help other employees learn new skills, and say the people they work with are generally open to new ideas.

These findings suggest that the Bush administration's effort to reduce the layers of federal management may produce important gains in performance. But the effort thus far has two problems. First, it relies on the same easily manipulated manager-to-employee ratio that undermined parallel efforts by both the Reagan and Clinton administrations. Second, it has yet to include the political layers of the hierarchy, which account for between 25 and 40 percent of the layers across the government organization chart. Although Office of Management and Budget Director Mitch Daniels said in July that political layers would not be excluded from the review, there is no evidence yet that the Bush administration has any more interest in reducing the number of presidential appointees than previous administrations had. To the contrary, the administration appears well on its way to filling every political slot available.

Moreover, it is important to note that the Bush budget has yet to set aside any significant funding for workforce investments such as training, technology and additional staffing. Nor has the administration explained how its confidence in existing recruitment and promotion authorities, such as loan forgiveness for new graduates or simplification of the pay system, can be reconciled with a budget that includes no new funding

for actually using those tools. Departments and agencies must find the money for recruitment, relocation and retention bonuses on their own, which often means cannibalizing training and technology budgets. Agencies must take the risk that their managers have the ability and motivation to use simpler pay systems to reward high performance rather than longevity.

APPRAISING PEOPLE

The fourth characteristic of a healthy public service is that it performs its job well and is held accountable for doing so. If employees are to be motivated by the chance to accomplish something worthwhile for their country, they should be held responsible for their performance, and, when they excel, be rewarded and promoted.

It is hard to imagine how the federal government could hold its employees accountable for performance, however, given its hyper-inflated performance appraisal process and its broad reluctance to discipline poor performers.

The problems with the performance appraisal process are well known. Forbidden by Congress to use quotas, most federal managers do what comes naturally and over-grade their employees. Between 1991 and 1996, the percentage of GS 13-15 managers and supervisors who were rated outstanding rose from 35 percent to 56 percent, GS 13-15 employees from 32 percent to 49 percent, and GS 1-12 em-

ployees from 27 percent to 39 percent.

If the Office of Personnel Management has its way, however, no one will know what the ratings are in 2010. The agency stopped publishing annual employee performance data in its 1999 *Fact Book* of civilian employee statistics, ostensibly because it could not figure out how to present data from the increasing number of pass/fail systems in its appraisal statistics.

At about the same time, OPM released a study called “A Quest for the True Story,” which estimated that the true proportion of poor performers in the federal workforce was just 3.7 percent. Then-OPM Director Janice R. Lachance heralded the number as proving “that the federal workforce is not a sanctuary for the chronically bad employee.”

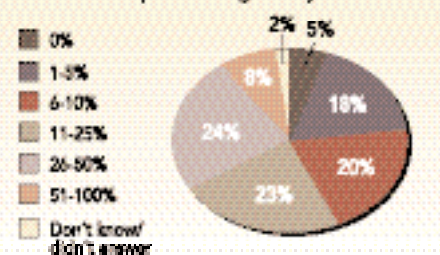
POOR PERFORMANCE PROBLEM

A much more troubling portrait of poor performance emerges when federal employees are asked to give a specific estimate of the number of their fellow workers who are not performing their jobs well. On average, the employees interviewed for this report estimate that 23.5 percent of their co-workers are not up to par. Only 5 percent say that all of their co-workers do an effective job.

Asked what might explain the level of poor performance, federal employees and managers are not particularly forgiving toward either their organizations or the poor performers. Only 16 percent say the poor performers do not have the training to do their jobs well. A little more than 30 percent say the poor performers are simply not

POOR PERFORMER PERCENTAGE

Estimated percentage of fellow employees who are not performing their jobs well:



qualified for their jobs, and 37 percent say their organizations do not ask enough of those employees.

The four groups of employees surveyed differ on both the number of poor performers and the cause of the problems. Not surprisingly, given their role in both appraising and leading employees, SESers and

selves as average, and none say they are below average. This is an example of the “80/20 rule,” in which 80 percent of employees in almost any organization believe they are in the top 20 percent of performers. Such is the nature of self-assessment, which is why individual performance appraisal systems are so difficult to manage and why quotas and

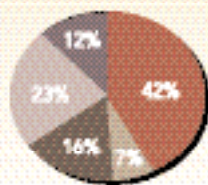
percent say the same about spending money wisely.

Asked which sector of the economy is best at delivering services on the public’s behalf, more than half of federal employees say nonprofit organizations, for-profit businesses or state and local governments, rather than their own employer. Only 32 percent say the federal government is best at helping people, and a woeful 13 percent say the federal government does the best job of spending money wisely.

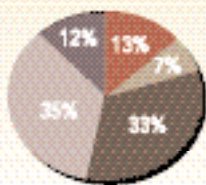
DELIVERING THE GOODS

Which sector is best at:

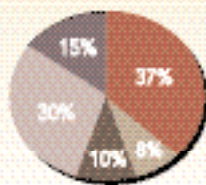
Delivering services on the public’s behalf



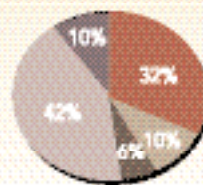
Spending money wisely



Being fair in its decisions



Helping people



Legend: Federal government (dark red), State and local government (light red), For-profit businesses (dark grey), Nonprofit organizations (light grey), Don't know/didn't answer (white).

SEARCHING FOR RESPECT

The fifth and final characteristic of a healthy public service is that it has the respect and confidence of the people it serves, including the President and Congress. That means the public can tell the difference between who makes the policies of

GS managers see less poor performance under their command than GS employees and PMIs do, and are more likely to blame the poor performance they see on employees who are not qualified for their jobs. On the other hand, as the targets of criticism, GS employees and PMIs blame poor performance on the organizations. But whoever is to blame, all four sets of employees see much more poor performance than there should be in a healthy public service.

Unfortunately, all four groups of employees share a belief that little can be done about the poor performance problem. Only 30 percent say their organizations do a very good or somewhat good job at disciplining poor performers, compared with 67 percent who say they do not. The PMIs remain the toughest critics of all, with 80 percent saying their organizations are only somewhat good or not good at all at disciplining poor performers.

These ratings have to be balanced against each respondent’s self-assessment. Fifty-eight percent of respondents say they are doing a very good job, and 39 percent say they are better than average. Just 3 percent rate them-

grading curves are so often used to trim the natural instincts of managers to rate all employees above average.

These ratings also have to be compared with the private sector, where private employees estimated that 26 percent of their peers do not perform their jobs well in spite of the fact that nearly half also say their organizations do a very good or somewhat good job of disciplining poor performers. It could well be that the perception of poor performance among federal employees would be much lower if the government had an agile disciplinary process, or that the perception of poor performance in the private sector would be much higher if its organizations had to work under federal rules.

Federal employees may rate themselves highly, but they offer a mixed view of their organizations’ performance. Fifty-one percent say their organizations do a very good job helping people, and 41 percent say the same about running programs and delivering services. However, only 29 percent say their organizations do a very good job at being fair in their decisions and just 22

government—popular or unpopular—and who carries them out. It also means that the President and Congress must tell the truth about the true size of government needed to deliver the goods and services that Americans have come to expect.

By these and other measures, the federal service gets mixed grades from the people and leaders it serves. Presidents and Congresses long ago decided it was better to hide the true size of the federal workforce through contracts, grants and mandates than to tell the whole story about the number of people it takes to deliver the services provided by the federal government. Politicians have also long since decided they can get more mileage by denigrating public service in campaigns than by celebrating it.

Until recently, Americans strongly believed the federal government is not to be trusted. Trust in government surges in the wake of crisis, however, and reached its highest levels since the 1960s following September’s terrorist attacks. According to a survey conducted by the Brookings Institution’s Presidential Appointee Initiative in

July, only 29 percent of Americans said they trusted the government in Washington to do what is right just about always or most of the time. By Oct. 1, that number had jumped to about 65 percent. Although the confidence almost always wears off over time, the recent gains do speak to an underpinning of readiness to rally around the federal government when the nation is in trouble.

Moreover, there is no sign that Americans have reduced their expectations of government. To the contrary, Americans want more of virtually everything government delivers. Americans are much more likely to favor reinventing government over devolving or downsizing it.

In addition, 50 percent of Americans say they have a very or somewhat favorable view of the federal government in Washington, and 69 percent feel that way about federal workers. Americans may not trust the government as a whole to do the right thing, but they do feel favorable toward the institutions and individual employees that guard our borders, deliver Social Security checks, monitor food safety, protect the environment and take care of the nation's veterans.

Nevertheless, only 30 percent of Americans say they would recommend that their sons or daughters choose a government job over a private job, and the vast majority believe federal workers are motivated primarily by job security, salary and a steady paycheck. Of course, the latest survey shows that is true of many federal employees.

Despite the mixed public opinions, half of federal employees say they are very proud to tell their friends and neighbors where they work, and 40 percent are somewhat proud. (And remember, the survey was conducted long before the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11.) Nevertheless, nearly one-fifth of federal employees say they are not satisfied with the public's respect for the work they do. Fifty-four percent also say that the word "trusted" doesn't describe their organizations well, and 52 percent say a similar job outside government would generate the same level of respect from family and friends.

A CALL TO ACTION

Twelve years after the National Commission on the Public Service, chaired by former Federal Reserve Board Chairman Paul Volcker, issued a report describing a "quiet crisis" in the federal civil service, it remains mired in neglect. The current personnel system was last overhauled in 1978 based on ideas from the 1950s that were built on research conducted in the 1930s, using data collected in the 1920s by scholars trained in the 1910s.

Few of the promises made in 1978 to deliver a workforce as good as Americans deserve have been honored, even as the bureaucratic sediment of one reform effort after another continues to pile up and as the calls for random job cuts and privatization increase. In late 2001, the half of the federal workforce that has been listed as holding jobs that are commercial in nature under the 1998 Federal Activities Inventory Reform Act, must be asking whether they'll be pushed out in the next five years. The other half must be wondering how they will survive another round of downsizing and contracting out.

For the past 20 years, the federal government has been telling its employees to get out, retire early and find another job. Perhaps it is time for the federal government to tell most of its workforce to stay a little longer and to make sure that poor performers are either disciplined or invited to leave.

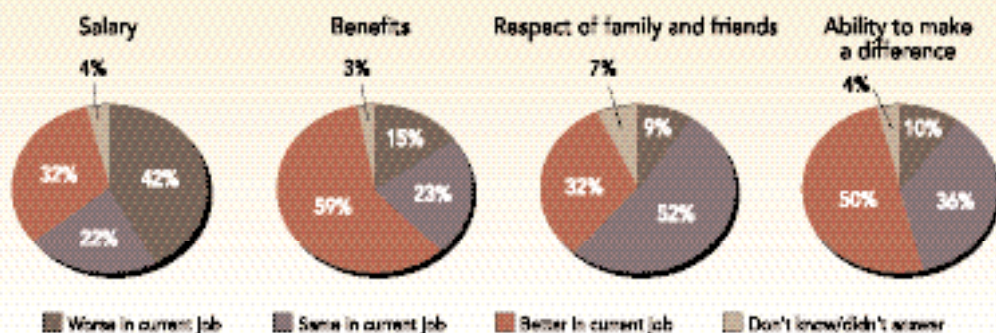
Merely tinkering at the entry level with current authorities, such as recruitment bonuses and forgiveness of student loans, will not restore the public service to good health. Hiring incentives will not convert frustrating jobs into exciting opportunities, and a faster hiring process only hastens the day when talented recruits start look-

the 21st Century warned se world depends on the quali

Unfortunately, the federal public and its leaders are neve act now to make sure that fe

HOW THE OTHER HALF LIVES

View of life in government compared to similar job outside government:



ing for a way out. Absent a broad effort to remove persistent barriers to high performance, the federal govern-