The Culture of the Federal Government

Public Service
The stereotype may be that federal employees are people looking for undemanding jobs and lots of security, but in fact the government attracts many dedicated, idealistic souls who are passionate about serving their country and having a positive effect on society.

Washington, D.C.
Though the majority of federal jobs are located outside the Beltway, D.C. is the mecca of federal employment. It’s a one-company town in which it often seems that everyone works for the government.

Youth
D.C. has the feel of a college town (which it is—there are four major universities in the area). Parts of the government employ very youthful workforces, as many recent grads come to spend a few years in public service before going to grad school or moving into the private sector.

Glamour
Part of the allure of government work in Washington is the perceived access to our nation’s power brokers. While entry-level employees rarely interact with politicians and heads of state, even the lowliest employees get invitations to events such as lectures and receptions.

Mobility
Employment in government and related fields is very fluid. Young people spend their early careers jumping from position to position, building contacts and looking for more responsibility and prestige. Many people stay in D.C. for just a few years and then take their experience to the private sector. Elected officials and political appointees are in the most volatile job market of all, but they seem to take changes of fortune in stride.

Party Politics
If politics interests you, be aware that your party affiliation can strongly influence your career track. Even if you don’t hold strong political beliefs, at a certain point in your career, you will probably need to align professionally with one party or the other. Because most employment at federal agencies is not affected by election results, the culture there differs from that of the Executive Office of the President or the Hill, where getting booted out of your job after an election is possible.

FAST STATS

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<tr>
<td>Number of Federal</td>
<td>2.8 million</td>
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<td>Number of State and Local</td>
<td>19.8 million</td>
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<tr>
<td>Approximate starting salary</td>
<td>Depends on GS grade. See page 2.</td>
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From: The US Bureau of the Census and the Office of Personnel Management
Government Jobs = Work/Life Balance

Federal benefits that enable you to have a balanced life include:

- Flexible work schedules: The flexibility to structure your work hours means you can start and finish work early to take night classes, or you can compress your work schedule to complete 80 hours in nine days and take every other Friday off (depending on the position).

- Great health coverage: Choose from one of the widest selections of health plans anywhere. The federal government also offers great deals on life insurance and long-term care insurance.

- Generous annual and sick leave: In addition to 10 federal holidays, new employees get 13 days of vacation and 13 days of sick leave a year. Vacation time increases to four weeks after just three years.

- Help paying for the commute: Federal agencies offer subsidies for mass transit where appropriate, and many also enable you to telecommute from your own home.

- Great retirement: The Thrift Savings Plan is the government’s 401k retirement plan in which agencies match a portion of your own investment. This is part of a generous three-tiered retirement plan.

Getting Your Foot In The Door

Check Out What’s Happening on Campus
Government agencies occasionally participate in on-campus recruiting and job fairs. Stay in touch with the Office of Personal & Career Development to find out when government organizations will be on campus.

Send your Resume to a Specific Person
“It’s always best to find a manager and send him or her your resume. It can take months to go through HR,” says one insider. Send your resume to agencies that appeal to you, whether or not they’re advertising openings, as well as applying to advertised positions.

Network
If you don’t think you know anyone in government, ask around. (Try relatives, friends, friends’ parents, and professors.) You might be surprised. Follow up on every possible lead. Don’t forget to call your congress-people. Arrange informational interviews with everyone you can. If they act receptive, ask their advice on the best person at their office or agency to send a resume to. Use LinkedIn.com to find Wake Forest alumni contacts.

Keep up with the News
Follow current events and look for articles about what’s happening at government agencies; the news may give you clues about who’s likely to be hiring and who’s not.

Pound the Pavement
Insiders agree that it’s difficult to conduct a Washington job search from afar. If you don’t want to move to DC without a job, consider visiting for several weeks. If you want a job on Capitol Hill, it’s especially helpful to make the rounds in person and to get to know everyone. A receptionist can help you get your resume into the right hands.

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Applying for Government Positions

In most cases, college students should apply for government positions using a resume. Some civil service positions, however, also require a standardized application form, typically the OF-612. You can download a copy of the OF-612 from www.usajobs.opm.gov.

KSAs
You may encounter KSA (Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities) questions when responding to specific government vacancy announcements. Placed at the end of some announcements, these questions address specific knowledge and skills required for the position. Answer KSAs on a separate sheet(s) of paper and attach them to your resume or OF-612.

**Knowledge**: Mastery of facts; range of information in subject matter area.
**Skills**: Proficiency, expertise, or competence in given area; e.g., science, art, crafts.
**Abilities**: Demonstrated performance to use knowledge and skills when needed.

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Tips for Writing KSAs

A resume is an important component of the job application process, but addressing the KSAs listed in a federal job opening gives you an extra chance to draw attention to your strengths and expand upon the specific factors the agency is looking for. Don’t exclude anything from your KSA responses just because it is on your resume.

- Read the job announcement carefully, highlighting key words or phrases describing the position responsibilities so you remember to address those points in your KSA responses.
- Go back to your resume and outline a list of experiences you’ve had that address each KSA. Review each list and select the items that best illustrate a link between your experience and each KSA as you compose your responses.
- Add information relevant to each KSA that may not be included in your resume—such as specialized training, publications, leadership roles, student activities, or awards. Make sure you take credit for your entire range of experiences including volunteer work, internships, school projects, and extracurricular activities.
- Link all these different examples explicitly to the KSA questions. Whether you’ve worked as a waitress or cashier, served as a student club officer, or volunteered at a nursing home, the key is to tie these experiences back to the KSAs in a way that demonstrates that you are the best candidate for the job.
- Write your KSAs in the first person.
- Use a variety of concrete examples to illustrate your skills. Be sure to include examples that demonstrate your ability to take initiative.
- Focus on outcomes to which you directly contributed, citing quantitative data where possible. For example, how much money or time you generated or saved, how many people attended, or how many units you produced.
- Make sure your answers reflect your level of responsibility. Similarly, clearly identify who you interacted with and how (like providing key information to a manager, working with a group of peers, or supervising a team).
- Each KSA answer should be between a half a page and a page in length.
- Review your answers to ensure they are succinct and easy to read.
- Don’t use acronyms. Spell out everything,
- Focus on content, and don’t forget to proofread.

Writing KSAs: A Framework

1. In the opening statement, refer the reader to the KSA you are addressing.
   “In my current position as a _____ with the _____, I have had extensive experience with....”
   “In the course of my duties as a _____, I am responsible for....”
   “My ability to _____ was gained through formal education augmented by over ____ years of practical experience as a _____ for the _____.”
   “Since _____, I have been a _____ with the _____ and responsible for....”

2. Give examples that clearly demonstrate your knowledge, skills and abilities.
   “In one instance I....”
   “When I started on the job we had a recurring problem with....”
   “One major project involved....”
   “My supervisor selected me to serve on a task force to....”
   “I collaborated with a team to....”

3. Take your examples one step further. Look for key results. Quantify if possible.
   “The new procedures I instituted resulted in....”
   “My ability to ____ substantially/significantly increased/decreased.....”
   “I received a Performance Award for....”
   “We exceeded our goals by....”
   “This led to....”

4. Provide specific examples or relevant training or course work


Example:

KSA: Skill in presenting information both orally and in writing.

“During my tenure with the National Cancer Institute (NCI), and especially in my current position, a substantial part of my duties has required strong skills in presenting information both orally and in writing. As an example of my oral communication skills, I was selected by the office Director to be a presenter at an NCI symposium on the documentation of cancer research. This symposium was designed to inform cancer researchers about the new methods of cancer documentation within the NCI guidelines. This symposium was attended by 100+ participants consisting of researchers, scientists and support staff. I spoke on the history of the NCI, the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on documentation, and the relationship between NCI and the National Institutes of Health.

In my former position as Executive Assistant to the Office of the Director (OD), I served as the liaison between the support staff of the OD, the NIH executive support staff, and companies in the private sector. I was responsible for keeping all parties informed about assignments and tasks due to the OD. My ability to communicate this information clearly and succinctly was very important in ensuring that the assigned tasks were fully understood and completed in a timely manner.

Effective written communication skills are also critical in my current position. I have taken over a number of writing assignments previously completed by my supervisor. For instance, I draft monthly reports that update Division Directors and Institute Administrators on changes in procedures and regulations and their impact on operations. These written reports are concise yet detailed, and they are routinely approved by my supervisor without corrections. In addition, all office correspondence is routed through me to ensure procedural and grammatical accuracy before I give it to the Director for signature.

My experience and skills have been supplemented by several related training courses in oral and written communications that I have completed through the Graduate School, USDA, and the NIH Training Center. These courses include the following:

Report Writing - June 2010
Federal Writing Skills - May 2010
Speaking Clearly and Effectively - April 2009”

Source: http://wflc.od.nih.gov/careers/ksa/sample_ksa1.html
Helpful Websites

Federal Government Job Search Sites
www.usajobs.opm.gov
The #1 source for federal government jobs

www.studentjobs.gov
Full-time positions, summer employment, and internships for students and recent grads

www.studentjobs.gov/searchmajor.asp
Helpful listing of federal jobs by college major

www.studentjobs.gov/e-scholar.asp
Listing of and links to many government internships

www.makingthedifference.org
Student-centered website with a wealth of info about federal jobs and internships

Select Agency and Department Sites
Department of State  www.state.gov
Seek Foreign Service Officers in various specialties: Administrative, Consular, Economic, Political, or Public Diplomacy. Also have internships. Exam is required. Go to www.careers.state.gov for test dates and to register.

Department of Transportation  www.dot.gov
Seek budget analysts as well as other positions

Department of Interior  www.doi.gov
Seek people in a variety of career fields from archaeology to biology to history to run the National Park Service

Environmental Protection Agency  www.epa.gov
Seek scientists as well as other positions

Internal Revenue Service  www.irs.gov
Seek accountants and revenue specialists as well as other positions

National Institutes of Health  www.nih.gov
Jobs and internships in medical research

Department of the Treasury  www.treasury.gov

United States Department of Agriculture  www.usda.gov
Seek budget analysts, scientists, and other positions

Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation  www.pbgc.gov
Seek math majors for actuarial work and other positions

Department of the Navy Civilian Human Resources  https://chart.donhr.navy.mil/
This huge employer would rank #8 on the Fortune 500 list. Seeks project managers, budget analysts, and other positions.

The Library of Congress  www.loc.gov
**Helpful Websites continued...**

**www.hillzoo.com**  
Job bank with postings listed by political party as well as non-party affiliated

**www.rcjobs.com**  
General listings for various DC job openings

**www.politemps.com**  
Legislative, government, and political staffing service for the DC area

**www.washingtonnetworkgroup.com**  
Networking organization of over 2,300 professionals in DC in business, finance, and government

**www.washingtonjobs.com**  
Washington Post job listings

**North Carolina Government Sites**

**www.osp.state.nc.us**  

**www.doa.state.nc.us/yaio/intern.htm**  
North Carolina State Government Internship Program

**Federal Internship Programs**

Two federal government internship programs to check out:

- **Student Temporary Employment Program (STEP)**  
  Paid positions ranging from a summer job to a position that lasts as long as the student is in school.

- **Student Career Experience Program (SCEP)**  
  Work must relate to student’s area of study and requires the agency to have a formal commitment with the student’s school. After completing 640 hours of work, the student can be appointed to a permanent position without going through the traditional hiring process.

**Opportunities with the Federal Government for New Grads**

- **Federal Career Intern Program**  
  [www.opm.gov/careerintern](http://www.opm.gov/careerintern)  
  Don’t be fooled by the name! These two year “internships” are actually paid full-time, post-graduate positions. Upon successful completion of the program, the participant may be eligible for permanent placement within an agency. To find opportunities, contact specific agency and ask if it participates in this program.

- **Presidential Management Fellows Program**  
  [www.pmf.opm.gov](http://www.pmf.opm.gov)  
  The Presidential Management Fellows Program (PMF) is a prestigious two year program which is designed to prepare participants for upper-level management positions in the federal government. Applicants must be in their final year of a graduate program and receive a nomination from their university before being considered for the PMF program. After two years, PMFs are eligible for conversion to permanent positions. Important note: PMF application deadlines are in the fall!