The MRPBS web site has been redesigned! You may have noticed our new look. Be sure to check out the Human Resources pages, and save it as a favorite! http://www.aphis.usda.gov/mrpbs/hr/index.shtml

HR CALENDAR

The Human Resources Division has put together what we hope you'll find to be a useful tool in helping you manage and respond to actions, activities and information related to a variety of HR-related functional areas. For example, what type of personnel actions do I need to remember to initiate each month?, when does the annual reminder on "use or lose" annual leave come out?, when are those financial disclosures reports due? The HR Calendar provides you with this and lots more information! The Calendar will be kept up-to-date as information changes and will be available on our website (http://www.aphis.usda.gov/mrpbs/hr/downloads/hr_calendar.pdf) for easy access by all our customers. We hope you will find this helpful!!

Be sure and check the calendar for the months of October, November, and December!!!

Coming in the January Issue:??????????????

The Benefits Buzz

Benefits Open Season is November 12 - December 10, 2007. The open season is your annual opportunity to review and change your enrollment in the Federal Employees Health Benefits (FEHB) program, the Federal Employees Dental and Vision Insurance Program (FEDVIP), and to enroll in the Federal Flexible Spending Accounts for health care and/or dependent care (FSAFEDS) for 2008.

This year, the Office of Personnel Management is emphasizing the need for employees to review and coordinate **all** of their benefits:

- Employees should review their health insurance plan for changes. Will the coverage meet your needs for 2008? Compare other FEHB plans available to you in 2008.
- If your health plan does not provide dental or vision coverage sufficient for your needs, will you need an additional dental or vision plan? Look at your options under FEDVIP.
- What about your out-of-pocket medical expenses, such as co-pays and over the counter medications? Look at FSAFEDS to meet your health care expenses and/or your dependent care (day care) expenses.

Watch for more information as open season approaches! Save this web page as a favorite on your browser: http://www.aphis.usda.gov/mrpbs/hr/benefits/index.shtml

THRIFT SAVINGS PLAN

Are you in danger of losing TSP matching contributions?

If you are an employee covered by the Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS), check the Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) contributions on the Year to Date column of your Statement of Earnings and Leave. Are you in danger of hitting the maximum annual contribution limit of $15,500 before pay period 24? If so, you will want to restructure your contributions so that you continue to invest at least 5 percent of your salary every pay period. If you hit that maximum $15,500 limit too early in the year, your TSP contributions will stop, and you will lose your agency matching contributions for any pay period that you don't contribute to TSP. Take a few minutes to evaluate, calculate, and if necessary, revise your contributions for the remainder of the year. The pay year ends with pay period 24 this year (pay period ending December 8, 2007, official pay date is December 20).

You can review your Statement of Earnings and Leave, and make your TSP contribution changes, on the National Finance Center's Employee Personal Page: https://www.nfc.usda.gov/personal/index2.asp or you may fax a TSP-1 form to HR-Benefits at 612-370-2035.

Employees covered by the Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS) do not receive agency matching contributions to the TSP.

Catching Up TSP

Employees covered by FERS or CSRS who are age 50 or older by December 31,2007, may contribute an extra $5,000 to TSP, only if their regular contributions will reach the $15,500 limit in 2007. Catch up contributions are made using the NFC Employee Personal Page, or by faxing a TSP-1-C form to HR-Benefits at 612-370-2035. Catch up contributions automatically stop when the $5,000 limit is reached, and catch up elections do not carry over from year to year.

Effective Date of Transactions

Please note that TSP-1 and TSP-1-C forms faxed to HR Benefits are effective at the beginning of the following pay period. Transactions processed through the NFC Employee Personal Page may be effective in the pay period it is processed. Please take this into consideration when you are doing the math!

TSP-1 and TSP-1-C forms are available under Civilian Forms at http://www.tsp.gov/

Retiring Soon?

Are you planning to retire soon? The end of the year is the most popular time to retire. If you haven't already submitted your retirement application, and taken the necessary steps to retire, get the forms and information at http://www.aphis.usda.gov/mrpbs/hr/benefits/retirement.shtml

If you have questions about your retirement, insurance, or TSP benefits, please contact your servicing Benefits Specialist: http://www.aphis.usda.gov/mrpbs/contact_us/benefits.shtml

eOPF – Where are we now?

In August, Human Resources shipped approximately 15,000 hard copy Official Personnel Folders (OPFs) to Virginia to be converted to an electronic format. The subsequent electronic version of the folders, or eOPF, will be available to Human Resources users in November. Access to the electronic folders by MRP employees is projected for the end of 2008.

Until eOPF is rolled out to employees, HR will continue to print and mail the SF-50, Notification of Personnel Action.

Quick Facts on Awards

Are you wondering what type of award is best suited for your employee's recent accomplishments? Do you want some guidance that does not involve scrolling through pages of bland directive? If so, then check out the recent edits that the Human Capital Planning Branch has made to the "Quick Facts on Awards". You may access the award information at the following link:

http://inside.aphis.usda.gov/mrpbs/awards.shtml

While you're there - check out the 2006 Secretary's Honor Awards page to see the accomplishments of Marketing and Regulatory Program colleagues who had their efforts recognized by the Secretary of Agriculture, Mike Johanns.

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Personnel

Security News

New Personnel Security Employee

Update on the New LincPass ID Badge

YOUR RESPONSIBILITY AS A USDA EMPLOYEE:

Before You Can Receive the New LincPass ID:

➢ All LincPass information is communicated directly to you through your Government email address listed in your eAuthentication account - most important and as soon as possible, please update your email and work telephone number listed in your profile at: http://www.eauth.egov.usda.gov. Without a current email address in eAuthentication, the issuance of a LincPass ID will be delayed.

➢ Only individuals who have completed background investigations are allowed to receive the LincPass ID Badge. HR Personnel Security is currently working at contacting those who do not have a record of investigation on file to begin the process through OPM's secure on-line e-QIP system.

1. Enrolling for the LincPass

Schedule an Enrollment Appointment - You will receive an email from the General Services Administration (GSA) HSPD-12 office letting you know that you have been sponsored by your Agency HR representative to receive a new ID card ("LincPass"). Actual dates are dependant on GSA's system Go-Live process in your area. The email will contain your name and your office contact information as submitted by your HR Personnel Security Office to the HSPD-12 ID card system. You will be asked to review that information for accuracy.

   a. **If your information is correct**, you will click on a provided website link which will take you to an enrollment scheduling tool. You will be able to view available local enrollment centers (i.e., badging offices) and will be able to select a date and time to appear at an enrollment center to enroll for the card.

   b. **If your information is incorrect**, you will be asked to contact your HR Personnel Security Office for the next steps to make the correction and be resubmitted.

Enroll for the card - Once you have scheduled the date of your enrollment appointment you will go to your selected enrollment station. Enrollment appointments are scheduled every 20 minutes continuously throughout the day, so it is important to arrive on time for your requested appointment.

You will be required to present two forms of identification (you will be provided a list of acceptable forms in the email from GSA). **Your enrollment cannot be processed without these two forms of identification**. The Enrollment Officer will access your enrollment record in the system and compare the information to that of your two sources of documentation.

   a. The Enrollment Officer will then scan your documents into the system. You will be required to sit for a digital photograph. This photograph will be displayed on the LincPass.

You will have your full set of fingerprint images captured. Two of your fingerprint images will be encrypted and stored on the LincPass microchip. This enables a security feature for card activation (see Step 3), and future use with building access and/or computer/network access.

2. Wait for LincPass to be printed and shipped to a designated location

It is important to know that after you have completed the enrollment process you will **not** receive your new LincPass right away. Your new ID card will be printed at a central printing facility and securely shipped to a location predetermined by USDA. **It could take up to 10 business days** for the card to be printed and delivered. You will be notified via email when the card is ready for pickup and where to go to retrieve it and activate it.

3. Pick up LincPass and activate it

Once you receive notification to pick up and activate your new LincPass, you will be instructed to go to the designated location at your first available opportunity. **You do not need an appointment to pick up and activate your LincPass.** Please bring 1 piece of photo identification with you to obtain your card. The process to activate the card takes 5 minutes:

   a. You will provide a fingerprint check for verification (match with system and match to card);
   b. You will create a Personal Identification Number (PIN) (6 digit, numbers only); and
   c. Your card will be updated with certificates and activated for usage.

It is important to remember that not all employees will have access to permanent enrollment stations. In those instances, portable enrollment stations will be deployed throughout the country and you will be notified accordingly.

For More Information on HSPD-12 and LincPass – visit the website at http://lincpass.usda.gov. You will need an eAuthentication login and password to access the protected part of the website

STAFFING NEWS

Monster Government solutions, the proprietor of the on-line application system, has changed the system name from "QuickHire" to "Hiring Management." Consequently, we have changed the name of this column to "Hiring Management Hints."   This is our only change. You can expect the same helpful guidance to continue in this column.

Hiring Management Hints:

How do I know if my supporting documentation has been received?

After your documents have been faxed you should receive an automated email confirmation. It will be sent to the email address listed in your USAJOBS account. You will only receive the email confirmation if you use the auto-generated fax cover sheets provided in the application process. If you do not receive this email confirmation, you should email apphelp@aphis.usda.gov for assistance.

You may also check to see if your supporting documentation has been received by visiting the USAJOBS website http://www.usajobs.gov/. At the usajobs.gov website click [My USAJOBS] and fill in your My USAJOBS username and password. Then click [Track your online job applications]. Scroll to the appropriate announcement. Your USAJOBS status should read "Resume Received" with a link titled [more information…]. Click on the [more information...] link, and you will be transferred to the USDA system

Once transferred to the USDA system, you will be prompted to select one of two options. Select the "View/Generate Fax Cover Sheets" option and then click [Continue]. In the past, your documentation would show as being attached to the specific vacancy announcement to which you applied. Today your documentation is attached to your 'profile' and specific announcement numbers no longer appear. What you will see now is a list of fax cover sheets. The fax cover sheets you should look for will read "Not Applicable" under the announcement number column. The documentation associated with the "Not Applicable" fax cover sheets will attach to your profile. This means the documentation associated with those fax cover sheets has been submitted to all announcements to which you have applied subsequent to the documentation's receipt in the system. The last column, "status," will reflect "Received" and indicate the date of receipt for all faxes.   When the status column reflects "Not Received" no fax has been received for that document type.

As an added feature, the system will submit any documentation attached to your profile when you apply for future vacancies

Reference Checking: Advice for Applicants

By Steve Oppermann

In this article, the focus is an issue that often creates angst for job applicants: whether or not to allow the prospective employer to contact your current supervisor for a reference. The selecting official may well believe that your current supervisor would be THE best source of recent information about your performance and/or conduct on the job, since she/he is theoretically in the best position to make those judgments.

If that's the case, why wouldn't you, as the applicant, want your potential supervisor to contact your current one? One explanation is that many employees apply for vacancies without letting their supervisors know that they are looking for other employment and are reluctant to have that information disclosed. Applicants may be fearful that the supervisor would consider them to be "disloyal" and would hurt the candidate's chances of being selected; some fear that the supervisor might go beyond that to make the employee's work-life more difficult and reduce the chances of being promoted in the current organization.

Often, applicants will give "conditional" permission to have their current supervisor contacted for a reference. Usually, that means either when an employee has been found to be a finalist for the subject position or when the applicant has been advised that she/he is the top candidate.

While it would be nice to have a "one size fits all" answer to the question as to whether or not to allow the prospective employer to contact your current supervisor for a reference, it is really a case-by-case decision. Much depends on your working relationship with your supervisor. In the best-case scenario, ou would have no hesitancy about going to your supervisor and letting her/him know that you are applying for a position and that she or he may be contacted by the selecting official.

 If your relationship with your supervisor is one of trust, I think it would be reasonable, even helpful, to let the supervisor know why you are applying for the position – i.e., what about it is of particular interest to you.

If your relationship with your current supervisor is not particularly good, and/or you believe that your supervisor would react adversely to finding out that you are trying to go elsewhere, you are faced with a dilemma. If you tell the selecting official that it is okay to contact your current supervisor, the latter might attempt to subvert your bid for the job. If, on the other hand, you ask the selecting official not to contact your current supervisor, he/she may feel that there is not enough reliable information available about your performance and conduct to support a decision to select you.

As in many employment (and life) situations, about the best you can do in determining whether/when you are willing to let a potential selecting official contact your current supervisor is to apply your best judgment.

This situation provides yet another good reason for making every effort to establish and maintain a good working relationship with your supervisor. I recognize that it is easier said than done – and I didn't always do it successfully in my own Federal career – but it is well worth the effort. Most supervisors are willing to meet an employee half-way, although there is always the potential for a personality clash that is seemingly irresolvable.

A Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) Special Report, "Reference Checking in Federal Hiring: Making the Call" encourages job applicants to:

"…support reference checking and play an active role in making connections between reference checkers and reference providers."

"…be responsive to requests to provide contact information and information about employment history."
"Select reference providers who have observed their work and who are available to communicate their observations clearly and accurately." (and)

"Be candid about their strengths and weaknesses during the hiring process."

Coming Soon...E-Verify

Within the next few weeks, the Human Resources Division will begin using E-Verify to substantiate the employment eligibility of all new hires in Marketing and Regulatory Programs (MRP). E-Verify is an electronic employment-eligibility verification program operated by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), in coordination with the Social Security Administration (SSA). The system is used to verify name, date of birth, Social Security number and immigration information of new employees and its use has been mandated by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB).

This electronic verification is considered an extension of the I-9 process and all MRP employees completing an I-9 form will undergo electronic verification. The I-9 form is the hard copy employment eligibility verification form that all employers are required to use to verify the identity and employment eligibility of the people they hire.

The implementation of E-Verify will create a change in the time frames for submitting
I-9 forms to the servicing human resources offices. The I-9 form must be completed on the first day of employment and a copy faxed or hand-carried that day to the human resources office. Upon receipt of the I-9 form, HR will start the electronic verification process.

When information from the I-9 form is entered into the E-Verify system, one of three responses will be returned:

➢ Employment Authorized: Employment Eligibility is Verified
➢ SSA Tentative Non-Confirmation (TNC): The Social Security information could not be verified.
➢ DHS Tentative Non-Confirmation: There is an information mismatch with USCIS.

Employees will be notified promptly in writing if a TNC is received on their information. Employees can contest the TNC finding if they believe the information held by SSA or DHS is incorrect. An employee has 8 work days from the date they are notified of the TNC finding to resolve a discrepancy in their information.

Employees who do not contest Tentative Non-Conformation findings or who have information discrepancies that cannot be resolved within the time frames allotted by the E-Verify program cannot be allowed to continue their employment.

Additional information on the E-Verify process will be provided as HR works though the implementation of the procedure within MRP.