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Photo: County File Upload Team. Left to right, front row - William Hardrict, Carole Childs, Brenda Fahrbach; second row- Cindy Kranz, Jerry Kleiman, Richard Mellinger, Julie Peters, Joseph Acosta; back row - Greg Stoker, David Martin, James Kinney, Randy Collins, Don Andrews. Team members not in photo: Mary Frances McLaughlin, Pamela Haston, Theresa O'Dell, JoAnn Verhaeghe, Loretta Burns, Don Corley. Photo by: George McCusker, FSA/KCCO/PAD

County File Upload Process Team Wins FSA Administrator's Award -
FSA + ITS + NITC = Value Added + Millions Saved

This article was prepared with the help of Bill Hardrict, David Martin, and Jerry Kleiman (FSA).

In June, the County File Upload (CFU) Process Enhancement Team received the 2006 FSA Administrator's Award for Service to Agriculture for *improving business process effectiveness*. The team achieved savings to FSA of $1 million per year by reducing the quarterly data transfer process from 3 months to 2 weeks.

The County File Upload Process has been in place since 1988, moving FSA program data from 2,360 Field Service Center AS/400 minicomputer systems (covering about 3076 counties) to the Kansas City National Information Technology Center (NITC) mainframe. This information is used for program compliance reporting, statistical and economic analysis, Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests,

From System/36 to AS/400

For those who are computer history buffs, the data was originally stored on System/36 equipment which was upgraded to AS/400 minicomputer systems about 6 years ago. The vast accumulated data stored in these made it cheaper to continue using them than to migrate to a newer system, but the legacy technology required a lot of attention and time-consuming tape back-ups needed to be carefully timed so they wouldn't interfere with daily FSA operations.

and other information needs.

Four members of the Information Management Branch/Infrastructure Operations Division worked directly with FSA colleagues to transform how that data gets transferred: William Hardrict, Branch Chief; David Martin, one of the CFU project leads; Theresa O'Dell; and Jim Kinney.

The quarterly uploads

The quarterly County File Upload Process averages about 130 files per county for a national total of 400,000 files, comprising 860 million records and 217 billion bytes. Before the new CFU system was implemented, data from each AS/400 was transferred to tape and then sent to Kansas City. Processing each quarterly upload actually took about three months with the operations team covering the CFU process 24 hours per day, 5 days a week.

The old system was a huge drain of staff time and money.

Applying Internet Speed to the AS/400 Legacy System

About 18 months ago, the team began working on the challenge of how to link the AS/400 legacy technology to current technology and telecommunications tools in the ITS infrastructure. Another issue was how to avoid congestion in the gateway following the consolidation of regional traffic centers from eight down to two.

The CFU project combined many qualities: excellent teamwork, brainstorming and problem solving, and contributions from everyone on the team as they considered the best solutions in terms of technology as well as the logistics of scheduling.

A Real World Production Test

Luckily, the Tobacco Buyout program provided an opportunity to the CFU team to figure out how to modernize the process and develop the transfer protocols. It was a real world production test that paved the way for the County File Update Process Enhancement.

Timing the updates was also critical. The transfers couldn't interfere with FSA's daily work, applications using the data could not be required to make any changes to their processes, and the transfers had to be scheduled so they wouldn't clog the pipeline and cause

the data to stop flowing. Transfers were scheduled to start early in the morning before the FSA workday began. The transfers were rippled according to time zones, moving from east to west, to avoid a surge of data that would shut the process down.

The key factors that made it possible to transmit large volumes of data in a short time frame were:

1) 90% of the Service Centers had been upgraded to high speed T1 communication facilities.

2) The upgraded communications infrastructure made it possible for FSA to utilize the TCP/IP capabilities of the AS/400.

3) FSA had purchased and installed IBM *WebSphere MQ* and MQSoftware, Inc.'s *Qliner* data transport software products on all the service center AS400's and on servers in Kansas City. These now transmitted critical program data between States, Service Centers, and Kansas City.

The Award & the Accomplishment

Before the new CFU system was implemented, nationwide data was sent to Kansas City by tape over a twelve week period with operations staff working 24 hours per day, 5 days a week; the new
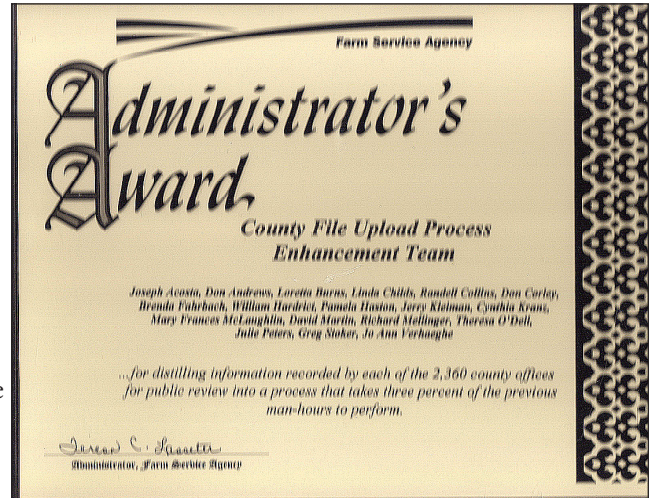
system transmits the data via the web and processing is reduced to 10 days with staff working the process 4 hours per day.

Before the change, annual costs were estimated at $ 1,216,000. With the new data transmission process, annual costs are reduced to $ 195,000 for an annual savings of $1,021,000. Staff hours are saved at the Field Service Centers. Operations staff no longer need to load and mail tapes (in larger centers, staff often stopped by on a Saturday, to load the second tape and check progress). Also about $200,000 of NITC costs are saved with the new process.

The CFUP Enhancement Team is another example of how ITS effectively collaborates with our customers and other OCIO organizations to find solutions that help the agencies deliver their programs reliably and efficiently.

CFU Enhancement Outcomes: Annual Cost Savings by Categories			
Cost Areas	Cost Before Change	Cost After Change	Net Savings
Field Service Center Staff: 12 FTE, GS-9/5	600,000	0	600,000
Kansas City Operations Staff	126,000.	15,000	111,000
Tapes supplies and mail costs	114,000	0	114,000
NITC Costs	376,000	180,000	196,000
Total	1,216,000	195,000	1,021,000

Email Spoofing The Subject was "1545453", "557", "57657", "586876" and "455"

from the newsflash prepared by the Exchange Operations Team: Bill Mackenzie & Kevin Pressley

Last spring, the ITS Exchange Operations team received several reports from employees who were sent strange email messages that had a number in the subject line and within the body of the message. The messages looked like they were sent from and to the recipient's email address. If you have received any messages that look like this, please delete them. There is no need to call the help desk.

The most common subject lines were "1545453", "557", "57657", "586876" and "455". Even though the messages looked like they were sent from the recipient's email address, the recipient's mailbox was not accessed. The "from" address was actually "spoofed". The messages originated from systems on the Internet that probably had been compromised. The intended purpose of the messages is unknown but we do know that they did not contain attachments or other malicious content.

The Exchange Operations Team has implemented content filters to prevent the further delivery of email messages with the most common subject lines, listed above. Read below for more information on email spoofing.

What is Email Spoofing and Social Engineering?

With the latest surge of email borne viruses, including the recent *Netsky* and *Sobig* worms, many people have received email notifications that refer to emails that they did not send. This is due to a technique called *Spoofing* which enables someone (or a malicious program) to hide the original sender's identity in an email. The latest viruses use this technique to make it more difficult to track down the source of an infected system.

What does an email "Undeliverable" message look like?

What does spoofing do? Spoofing allows a sending mechanism to specify practically anything in the FROM address of an email message. The FROM address does not need to be valid. Should someone or some process reply to a spoofed email, the reply will be sent, not to the originator, but to the address contained in the FROM field of the original email. This means that in many cases the email delivered to you does not actually originate from the address shown in your email program.

The following example shows how the spoofing technique can be used by a virus:
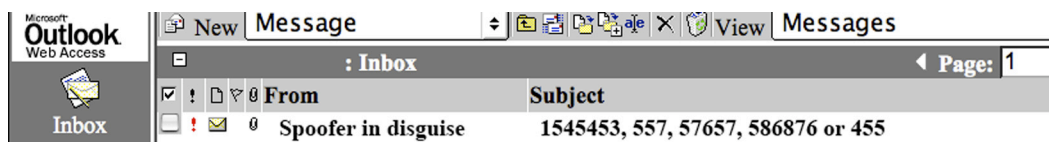
1. Let's say that an individual who uses the *user.1@domain.com* email address gets their PC infected with a mass-mailing virus.

2. The virus searches on *user.1@domain.com*'s PC for documents, address books etc and captures the email addresses it finds: (*user.2@domain.com*, *user.3@domain.com*, user.4@domain.com etc.)

3. Now the virus will send an email message to each of those addresses with a copy of itself attached.

4. While sending these messages, the virus also attempts to "hide" itself by protecting it's origin (spoofing). To do this, the virus populates the FROM address with an address randomly chosen from the list of addresses found on the system, for example *user.4@domain.com*. The email will appear to be coming from *user.4@domain.com* instead of the actual email address of the infected PC's user, *user.1@domain.com*.

The results of this technique?

Many people that receive email containing a virus will think that *user.4@domain.com* has sent out the virus and their system is infected. Consequently, everyone that replies to the email (including some anti-virus software) will notify an innocent user, *user.4@domain.com* instead of the actual victim, *user.1@domain.com*.

What about Social Engineering?

To further confuse people, virus and spam creators have become very proficient with social engineering techniques to make their messages look very legitimate. For example, they may add official company names from anti-virus companies or other reputable organizations (including internal groups like IT security) to their messages so they look like they are coming from a trusted source. To combat this issue, it is a widely accepted principle that reputable organizations NEVER send attachments in their email messages. So, if you ever receive an attachment from a supposedly reputable source, do not open it. If you receive email with an attachment from any source, check with the sender, delete it or call the local helpdesk - never open it without checking first.

Conclusion:

Malicious spoofing and social engineering techniques have become increasingly sophisticated and prevalent in recent years. Email users must be more educated and vigilant to ever evolving threats to avoid becoming victims of viruses or scams.

Building Blocks of the IT Budget: Accounting Codes & Timekeeping

Steve Ettien & Steve Spector

Everyone in ITS has a daily responsibility that many consider an annoying chore: timekeeping. But timekeeping is much more than keying in our hours so BPD can send us a paycheck - it forms the database of effort and resources that ITS puts into supporting our customers and their shared IT infrastructure and communications needs. In short - this is the data that helps establish the _real cost of providing comprehensive IT support_.

Starting this year it will provide the solid numbers and context our customers need for reliable IT budgeting; and it provides numbers with the transparency and reliability that Congress wants when it reviews our budget requests. In fact, timekeeping is not a chore, it is a fundamental part of doing business; nor is something we do in our *spare-time*.... it is a necessary part of our work day.

But, the reliability of the data depends on a couple of things - timeliness (on a daily basis) & accuracy (making sure you take the time you need to assign the correct codes to each WebTA transaction).

Accurate Coding, Reporting Integrity

	Account	Description
Add	9ME2IC2XX	CSB CS HW SW SUPPRT (INDRCT

Using the correct ITS accounting code for each transaction is vital to ensuring the integrity of the financial information both within the USDA financial system and the ITS *Cost Management Program*, the term we use for the system that calculates the cost of IT services. With proper accounting code usage and integrity, ITS will be able to provide good cost information for our own planning, and for our customers' planning needs so they will be able to budget accurately for the services that we provide. This is why we need everyone's commitment to correctly code and report your time.

Some practical insights

Much effort has gone into refining the service codes and definitions to both maximize the usefulness of the information and minimize the time needed for WebTA reporting. Service Definition Branch Chief Kelly Stelmach said that for her team in the Infrastructure Definition Division, the number of accounts is small and manageable. "The WebTA system is fairly easy to use. There are user manuals on the BPD website and we can always contact our timekeeper for assistance. What I most like about the WebTA system is that we can access it from home… but, the timekeeping accounts vary greatly by organization."

In practical terms, the actual number of codes most ITS staff have to contend with is usually eight, more or less. That is

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The Cost Management Concept:

From Soup (the Service Offerings)
to
Nuts (the Units of Measure & Accounting Codes)

Why is there a Cost Management program?

- OCIO, FSA, NRCS and RD created ITS as a way of making IT service more efficient, accountable, responsive, and cost effective.
- ITS must determine the real cost of operating and supporting the IT infrastructure and the IT requirements of its customer agencies.
- *Cost Management* is a method for capturing the total cost of IT services, resources, hardware and software - both the specific services rendered (direct costs) and the other background activities and resources that make those services possible (indirect costs).
- This is a relatively unique situation in the government and we are cooperatively devising the right way to accomplish this.
- Budget discipline is being enforced and ITS, customers, and the department must be able to budget accurately and also justify and predict IT requirements.

What are the elements of Cost Management?

- **Service Offering:** An individual service offering which creates the desired output to satisfy the customer's requirements. For example: Web Farm Management, Hardware and software acquisition, etc.
- **Consolidated Service Unit (CSU):** Logical cost units, usually a group of service offerings, used to capture the full cost of an end-to-end service (direct charge + indirect charge).
- **Direct Cost:** Cost of a specific service or services (such as telecommunication services) that can be directly accounted for and allocated.
- **Indirect Cost:** Cost of the other combined activities and resources that support a service that cannot be directly accounted for.
- **Units of Measure:** An agreed to metric that allows indirect costs to be allocated.
- **Reporting:** During FY 2006, ITS will produce reports of actual costs incurred for each SCA. These can be used to establish the ITS budget so we can deliver the services and improvements our customers need; and so the agencies can plan and budget accordingly.

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good news for everyone, considering there are about 60,000+ possible codes [60ish CSUs x (ITS branches + TSD groups) x 5 customer codes (3 customers, OCIO, and *indirect/shared*) x ≈54 (specific state & large office codes)].

Mary Jo Loberg manages the timekeeping for Infrastructure Operations Division. She says, "The system is straightforward. Our supervisors have customized their staff timekeeping system so most of our folks have only 12 codes to select from. Before, staff would give me their handwritten hours and then I would key it into the system, this is much better. Once they get used to doing it themselves, they are fine. The hardest thing is for employees to find the time to do it!"

Linda Muchow oversees timekeeping for the Technical Support Division and Infrastructure Definition Division. She says, "For TSD, Larry Brooks organized the codes into a manageable number for most of our employees. Then Group Managers work with their staff to set up their individual options."

Decoding the Accounting Code? - 069M F 4 I H 0 XX

As everyone is well aware, there were significant changes made to the ITS accounting code structure between FY2005 and FY2006. These changes were made in order to better track ITS costs and to tie these costs to the service lines and service offerings that are provided to our customers, the Service Center Agencies (SCA) and their state offices. These changes are also important because they will allow us to accurately inform the SCA and future customers about the true cost of services that they actually receive from ITS. Since the system is being phased in during FY2006, and is supposed to be fully implemented in FY2007, it is vital that our data is accurate.

For these reasons, it is very important that the account code that best describes the appropriate organization, customer, service being provided, and location options be selected for all transactions resulting in costs against ITS accounts (see graphic below). This includes all accounts reported in the time and attendance system.

And *don't neglect non-timekeeping situations and costs*- it is very important to link the appropriate accounting codes to ITS purchase orders and contracts, travel expenses, and PCMS purchases, etc.

The ITS accounting code is an 11-digit alpha-numeric string such as the following example: **069MF4IH0XX**. The various characters in the string have specific purposes and allow ITS costs to be tracked by fiscal year, fund, ITS organization, customer, service line and offering, and state, when applicable. A *description* that follows the number helps you verify you've selected the right option.

Critical Field Theory

While all of the fields are necessary, four fields are critical to various processes that are dependent on the accurate collection of expense information (the ones highlighted in yellow in the box below).

1. **Customer code.**
2. **Service Line code**.
3. **Service Offering code**.
4. **The two-digit State or "XX/state unspecified" code.**

FUND 06 - Fiscal Year; 9M - ITS Fund Code	DIVISION Code	BRANCH Code	Critical Fields for Accurate Timekeeping				Description: SERVICE OFFERING DESCRIPTION and DIVISION USE OF SERVICE OFFERING	
			CUSTOMER Code choices are I- ITS/indirect C- OCIO D- RD F- FSA N- NRCS	SERVICE LINES T- Telecommunications H- Hosting U- End-user Support M-Acquisition Management C- Customer Support D- Data S- Security	SERVICE OFFER-ING 50+ choices defining IT activities	STATE state code (two digit alpha code for indirect, states and large offices. XX is for *unspecified*)		
06 9M	F	4 (WRB)	I	H	0	XX	Hosting & Web Services	TSD/ BRANCH/ GROUP/ STATE/ or Indirect

1. Customer code.

The first critical field**.** This is the code which applies the expense to the specific customer that we are supporting with the service, or as an ITS or indirect expense that supports all the agencies. These customer specific codes should be used whenever possible and when the service provided applies only to that customer.

To the extent feasible, if only 2 customers are being supported, the costs should be split between just those two customers.

I code- If splitting the cost is not feasible, then the "I" customer code should be used. The "I" code should be used to record all ITS specific and indirect costs, and also when the cost applies to service provided to 3 or more of the customer agencies.

2. Service Line code & **3. Service Offering code**.

These two related codes are important because they identify the specific service(s) being provided to the customer through the transaction, or an indirect service line because several service lines or offerings benefit from it.

Most of the costs of services provided by the various branches within the Infrastructure Definition Division, Infrastructure Operations Division (IOD), and Technical Support Division (TSD) need to be associated with a specific service line and offering.

IO code - The indirect service line and offering (IO) codes should mainly be used by the Associate Chief Information Officer staff, Infrastructure Governance Division (except Security Policy Branch), Division Directors staff, and the Administrative Management Division.

Identifying the specific service line and service offering as well as the level of service will be critical as we move to the new cost management system, because this will allow us to develop the cost pools for these services, which in turn will allow us to develop more complete reports for these service areas. These rates will then become the basis for how our *service budgeting* is determined and validated.

4. The two-digit State or "XX - *state unspecified***" codes.**

Only the TSD and the IOD Telecommunications Operations Branch (TOB) currently track costs by state and have access to the various state and large office codes that have been established. In most cases, the state code is the postal code for the state, while unique codes have been established for each of the large offices. TSD staffs located in the states and large offices should use the state code(s) that have been identified for their location.

TOB currently only uses the state codes for tracking telecommunication costs at the state level.

XX code- All other divisions should be using the state unspecified (XX) code since the services they provide support the customer base across the board and can't be tied to a specific state, like the TSD costs and TOB telecom costs can be.

Timekeeping does not play favorites.

Timekeeping does not play favorites; each of us must do it, wherever we are in the organization. It may be our daily bane, but it is also our daily and yearly bread in terms of getting healthy and realistic budgets to support ITS and everything we do. For some of us it may be easier or more complicated.

Laurie Vincent, TSD Group Manager Montana/Wyoming (and acting GM for Idaho/Oregon) said people's experience with the process varies. "I try to emphasize to my folks that doing it daily will make their lives easier .... But some do, some don't. As for being straightforward and simple - no. There are too many codes that can be used by the same job. We have simplified the process by determining which codes are specific to our jobs. But with two or more state groups, it still becomes a large list."

Still, if our goal as an organization is to get accurate coding, then we have to accept the current hassles as something we just have to do and do right. But we can also come up with techniques or strategies that can make it easier. When asked about that, Laurie replied, "A better way to do it? Just get in the habit of marking down what you are doing for the day and record at the end of the day before leaving. The unfortunate thing is when IT Specialists are sitting at their workstations doing this type of paperwork, they cannot stop answering the phone or helping the user who happens to see them sitting there. It's great to be needed but they'd just like to have some free time to do the paperwork."

We are all in this together. If anyone has ideas on how to improve the process, or other helpful tips, send them in to:

mailto:ITS-Connections@wdc.usda.gov

Update on Cleaning Up Temp Folders

We received a note from Jeff Hart, NRCS, concerning the tip about cleaning up Temp Folders (Connections #4 and Customer News #1).

> Subject: Deleting Files from C:\temp
>
> ..... Question No. 2 which said that there is no harm in deleting any files from C:\temp. Before I followed this advice to reduce the size of my C:\temp, I asked my ITS specialist and received this response:
>
> "No, that is not true that you can remove everything under C:\temp. Not sure what your reading. There are specific files and folders that need to be retained in C:\temp for group policy and Mcafee."
>
> Can I remove files from C:\temp or not? Please advise,
>
> thanks...............jeff

Jeff's advice was correct. The newsflash of August 23, 2005, *Removal of Temporary Files:* described changes to the cleanup process. A few files do need to remain in the Temp Folders on the C:\ and E:\ drives.

In the time between when the Temp File tip was written and when upgrades were implemented to the computing system, changes in how ITS manages the computer network put certain required files into the Temp Folder.

Just in case any more questions come up, an excerpt of that Newsflash is included below. It names the files that must remain. In other respects, the tip was correct and all other files that end up in temp folders can be deleted.

Removal of Temporary Files
(excerpt from Newsflash August 23, 2005):

... questions have been received on cleaning out C:\temp and E:\temp on the CCE Windows 2000 Servers to provide additional space. The following guidelines can be used for cleaning out space. Please keep in mind that normal activities may recreate some of the files. As described below, you can remove the contents of these folders, but do not delete the folder itself.

Removal of files in C:\temp: Files located in the C:\temp can be removed with the exception of the following files;

C:\temp\Log.bk1
C:\temp\Log.bk2
C:\temp\Log.bk3
C:\temp\Log.txt

These files are generated each time the Server reboots and provides a history of the system checks for patches or script execution that occurs through domain policy. The Log.txt gets renamed to Log.bk1 and Log.bk1 gets renamed to Log.kb2, etc upon a restart.

Removal of files in E:\temp: Files located in E:\temp can be removed with the exception of the following folders;

E:\temp\FilePerm

E:\temp\SharePerm

E:\temp\splitdns

E:\temp\ SUSTROUBLE.

These folders contain log files and scripts that the Service Desk uses for troubleshooting. If any of the folders are missing it is not necessary to create a Service Desk ticket.

Do not remove files in C:\tmp: Files located in c:\tmp must remain at this time.

Do not remove files in E:\tmp: Files located in e:\tmp must remain at this time.

Do not remove files in C:\Winnt\Temp: Files located in C:\Winnt\Temp must remain at this time with the exception that any folder names starting with C:\Winnt\Temp\wfv## can be removed. These folders may be left over when McAfee performed a scan of a large file and ran into a problem.

Open a Magic Ticket and escalate the Work Order if you have questions.

ITS Printer Supplies BPA: Savings + Convenience

Last May, when TSD and OPPM arranged for the AMB Federal Sales BPA (*blanket purchase agreement*) for printer supplies, the assumption was the advantages would be obvious. The Technical Support Division produced the chart below to show examples of savings that can be achieved by using the BPA. The chart compares a few of the major models of printers that are used by our customers to show the cost difference between a typical supplier and the AMB BPA.

As you can see there are some printers with remanufactured products available and some that only have OEM (original equipment manufacturer) supplies available. Many products have savings of 30% to 75% (for fully guaranteed remanufactured products); even OEM items savings range from little difference to about 50%.

Our BPA includes many other features, along with savings:
- Each cartridge has a waaranty.
- If a printer needs a repair because of a faulty cartridge, the company sends someone onsite to make the repair at no cost to the government (regardless of the age of the printer or whether it still has a service contract).
- Our BPA has direct shipping to all ITS or SCA offices (CONUS and OCONUS locations).
- Shipping, plus recycling for all used cartridges, is included.

These are a few of the items and advantages agencies have for using the BPA. Our estimate of printer cartridge usage for the three agencies is at a $10Million+ rate prior to the BPA. The agencies could save, with a conservative estimate of 33%, over $3 million.

Savings on Representative Printer Supplies: Comparing Prices Between Boise OfficeMax and TSD's BPA with AMB Federal Sales

Make	Model	BOISE OFFICEMAX	AMB Federal Sales	
			OEM	Remanufactured
			USDA Price	USDA Price
HP	4100dtn Mono LJ	$ 77.57		$50.14
HP	8000 Mono LJ	$142.69		$64.31
HP	4500/4550 Color LJ Black	$ 66.90		$51.23
HP	4500/4550 Color LJ Cyan	$ 97.10		$51.23
HP	4700 Color LJ Cyan	$222.30	$215.67	
HP	1200 LJ	$ 19.17		$30.71
HP	2300 Mono LJ	$ 93.55		$51.23
HP	2420 Mono LJ (6,000 yield)	$200.40	$105.88	
HP	2430 Mono LJ (6,000 yield)	$200.40	$105.88	
HP	2550 Color LJ Cyan	$ 96.03		$56.68
HP	4000 Mono LJ	$ 96.03		$46.87
HP	4050 Mono LJ	$193.98		$46.87
HP	6540 Color DeskJet Black	$ 20.14	$ 17.24	
HP	2600 Color LJ Black	$ 73.14	$ 64.96	
HP	2600 Color LJ Cyan	$ 79.72	$ 70.81	
HP	2600 Color LJ Yellow	$ 79.72	$ 70.81	
HP	2600 Color LJ Magenta	$ 79.72	$ 70.81	
HP	3700 Color LJ Black	$163.53		$82.84
HP	5550 Color LJ Black	$202.62		$118.81
HP	5550 Color LJ Cyan	$275.00		$139.52
HP	5550 Color LJ Yellow	$275.00		$139.52
HP	5550 Color LJ Magenta	$275.00		$139.52
HP	4000/4050N Mono LJ	$ 89.18		$46.87
Xerox Phaser	6250 Color Laser Cyan	$110.40	$110.78	
Xerox Phaser	6250 Color Laser Magenta	$110.40	$110.78	

Admin News: EEO, Election Season, Health & Opinions

The Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) Complaint Process

Note: Earlier this year, the USDA Office of Civil Rights Services Division (CRSD) produced a brochure summarizing the EEO complaint process for employees or job applicants who believe they have been subjected to employment discrimination. This article excerpts some of that material. First, some frequently asked questions to give perspective on EEO complaints:

Q&A about EEO Complaints

Q: *What are the protected bases?*

A: The bases on which discrimination may be alleged are: race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age (if 40 or over), disability, reprisal (for prior participation in an EEO activity, or having opposed discrimination), political affiliation, sexual orientation, marital status, parental status, and genetic information.

Q: *What is an issue/claim?*

A: An issue (claim) is the specific action an employer has taken that causes an aggrieved person to believe he/she is the victim of discrimination.

Q: *How does an aggrieved person initiate an EEO complaint?*

A: An aggrieved person may initiate an EEO complaint by contacting an EEO Counselor for his/her agency or staff office.

Q: *How does an aggrieved person check the status of their EEO complaint?*

A: To check the status of your EEO complaint contact the Office of Civil Rights Customer Service Unit at (202) 401-0005, (800) 795-3272 (toll free), or (202) 401-0216 (TDD). An aggrieved person may also send an email to the Customer Service Unit at mailto:CR@USDA.gov.

Q: *Does an aggrieved person have to have a representative?*

A: No. However, he/she has a right to representation when using the EEO Process.

Q: *Does a representative have to be an attorney?*

A: No.

For more information, a CRSD Counseling Coordinator can be reached at: 202-690-3305, TDD/TDY 202-205-7688, or send a fax to 202-205-8746 .

To Initiate an EEO Complaint

There are specific steps to take to file a discrimination complaint. The Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) complaint process consists of the pre-complaint process (Step 1), and the formal complaint process (Step 2). If an aggrieved person or applicant for employment wants to file an EEO complaint, he or she must begin with the pre-complaint process.

Step 1 - Pre-Complaint Process

To initiate the pre-complaint process, an aggrieved person must contact CRSD within 45 calendar days of the date of the alleged discriminatory act or event; in the case of a personnel action, contact with CRSD should happen within 45 calendar days of the effective date of the personnel action.

Once contact is made, CRSD will give you:

- A letter confirming your date of contact;
- An initial Intake Form;
- A copy of your rights and responsibilities;
- A copy of the EEO Complaint Process Flow-Chart.

An informal complaint *cannot* be processed until a completed Intake Form is received in CRSD. An aggrieved person is asked, in the form, to elect participation in EEO Counseling or Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR).

If an aggrieved person elects to participate in EEO

Counseling, an EEO counselor will contact him/her to schedule an initial interview. If an aggrieved person elects to participate in ADR, the Conflict Prevention Resolution Center (CPRC) will contact him or her to schedule an ADR session.

If resolution is not reached during the pre-complaint process, the aggrieved person will be issued a Notice of Right to File (NRF) a Formal EEO Complaint.

Step 2 - Formal Complaint Process

A complainant must file a Formal EEO Complaint within 15 calendar days from the receipt of the NRF. Formal complaints may be mailed to:

> USDA, Office of Civil Rights
> Chief, Civil Rights Services Division
> 1400 Independence Ave., SW
> Washington, DC 20250-9403

or hand-delivered to:

> USDA, Office of Civil Rights
> Chief, Civil Rights Services Division
> 300 7th Street, SW, Suite 250
> Washington, DC 20024

CRSD will issue a Letter of Acknowledgement to confirm receipt of a formal complaint. A complainant will receive a Letter of Acceptance if all or part of the compliant is accepted. A complainant will be issued a Final Agency Decision if the complaint is dismissed in its entirety.

An Election Year & the Hatch Act: What We Can & Can't Do

From Michael Tolle, Employee Services Branch Chief, Administrative Management Division

With the mid-term elections on the horizon, we thought some Hatch Act reminders might be timely. The Hatch Act restricts the political activity of executive branch employees of the federal government. **That means us!**

In 1993, Congress revised the law to allow most of us to take a much more active role in partisan political campaigns and management. There are a lot of things we now can do while we are not on duty; but, even though we have much more freedom now, there still are some things we can't do. Examples of both sorts of activities are described in the boxes below.

Things We Can Do

- Running as candidates in nonpartisan elections, such as for many school boards;

- Assisting in voter registration drives;

- Expressing opinions about candidates and issues, such as through letters to the editor, as long as you don't use the title of your position to identify yourself;

- Contributing money to political organizations and candidates;

- Attending fund raisers;

- Signing and circulating nominating petitions;

- Campaigning for or against candidates, such as by walking around the neighborhood to discuss candidates with neighbors or standing outside a polling place distributing campaign literature;

- Actively participating in political clubs and parties, including serving as a delegate to a state or national convention; and

- Displaying candidates' bumper stickers on signs in your yard or on your privately owned vehicle (POV), even if you park the POV at work.

NOTE: BUMPER STICKER Details.
The bumper sticker one gets kind of tricky if you use your POV on official business. Employees who use their POV on a recurrent basis for official business may place a partisan political bumper sticker on the vehicle, as long as they cover the bumper sticker while the vehicle is being used for official duties. Employees also must cover any partisan political bumper sticker while the vehicle is being used for official duties, if the vehicle is clearly identified as being on official business. Finally, employees who use their POV only on an occasional basis to drive to another federal agency for a meeting or to take a training course, for example, are not required to cover a partisan political bumper sticker on their vehicle.

Things We Can't Do

- Running as a candidate in a partisan election;

- Engaging in political activity (wearing a button, displaying a poster, for example) while on duty, in a government office, or in a government vehicle;

- Soliciting, accepting, or receiving political contributions, such as by hosting a fund raiser for a partisan candidate, though there is a limited exception for federal labor organizations;

- Using official authority to influence an election; and

- Soliciting or discouraging the political activity of anyone doing business with the agency.

NOTE: Additional Restrictions.
There are additional restrictions on certain types of employees, such as Administrative Law Judges and career members of the Senior Executive Service, and employees of certain agencies, such as the CIA and FBI (however, we don't need to get into that here).

If you are politically active, make sure you know the details —
a wealth of Hatch Act Information is available.

If you want to read more about it, there is a wealth of Hatch Act information available at an Office of Special Counsel website, www.osc.gov/ha_fed.htm. This is something you don't want to trifle with—penalties for Hatch Act violations are severe—so don't take a chance. If you have any doubts about an activity you are contemplating, contact:

Michael Tolle, Employee Services Branch Chief
mailto:michael.tolle@stl.usda.gov or (314) 335-8719.

Voting Leave – Basic Guidance

Please Note: This guidance is generally applicable, but any relevant provisions in negotiated agreements must be followed.

The Federal Government has a longstanding policy of granting employees limited time off from work (i.e., excused absence or voting leave) to vote in Federal, State, county, or municipal elections or in referendums on any civic matter in their community. Employees may also, under certain rare circumstances, be allowed time off to register to vote. Here are some of the most frequently asked questions on voting leave:

Q. *Am I automatically entitled to voting leave?*

A. You are not automatically entitled to time off for voting or registering to vote. Individual circumstances will dictate if voting leave is appropriate. Many, if not most, employees will not meet the eligibility criteria.

Q. *When is voting leave appropriate for registering to vote?*

A. Voting leave may be granted for registering to vote only if registration cannot be accomplished on a nonworkday or by mail. For example, if a jurisdiction requires registration in person and you cannot do this on a nonworkday, you may be eligible for voting leave if your absence will not cause workload problems for your office.

Q. *When is voting leave appropriate for voting in an election?*

A. Generally, leave for voting in an election applies where polls are not open at least 3 hours before or after your regular work hours. If this is the case, management may approve voting leave to allow you to report to work 3 hours after the polls open or to leave work 3 hours before the polls close, whichever results in the lesser amount of time absent from duty. Your regularly scheduled tour of duty will be used to determine if you are entitled to this type of voting leave.

Here are three examples:

- If your polling place opens at 7:00 a.m. and closes at 8:00 p.m., and you are scheduled to work from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., you would not be granted excused absence for voting because you would still have at least 3 hours after the end of your work schedule to vote.

- If your polling place opens at 7:00 a.m. and closes at 7:00 p.m. and you are scheduled to work from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., then you may be granted ½ hour of voting leave from 4:00 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. *(if you request it and management approves).*

- If your polling place opens at 6:00 a.m. and closes at 7:00 p.m. and you are scheduled to begin work at 9:00 a.m. or later, or end work at 4:00 p.m. or earlier, then you would not be entitled to any voting leave.

Q. *When must I request voting leave?*

A. You must request voting leave in advance either orally or in writing. The webTA leave request type is "Other Paid Absence." The webTA transaction code for recording/charging the leave is "Voting."

Q. *Am I allowed voting leave to commute long distances?*

A. If your voting place is beyond your normal commuting distance and voting by absentee ballot is not permitted, you may be granted voting leave (not to exceed 1 day) to allow you to make the trip to the voting place to cast a ballot. If you need more than 1 day you will have to request paid or unpaid leave for the additional time off. This also will be very rare.

More questions?

If you have questions about ITS' voting leave policy, you may contact either:

Phyllis Hall	Michael Tolle
314-335-8711	314-335-8719
mailto:phyllis.hall@stl.usda	mailto:michael.tolle@stl.usda.gov

If you have other general leave questions or concerns, please contact Theresa Sayger, Bureau of Public Debt, at 304-480-8266, or email mailto:payroll@bpd.treas.gov. Additional information on voting leave can be found at the Bureau of Public Debt's Human Resources Notices/References website:

http://arc.publicdebt.treas.gov/DWP/fs/fsagociohrnotref.htm

which also contains a wealth of information about other Human Resources topics.

A Benefit with Teeth in It.... and Eyes, too! The new Federal Employee Dental and Vision Insurance Program

If you've been looking for a new benefit with some teeth in it, you won't have to look much longer. And, you'll get some help with the *looking* part as well.

The U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) recently selected the companies that will offer supplemental dental and vision benefits under the new Federal Employee Dental and Vision Insurance Program (FEDVIP). While OPM subsequently announced it was reevaluating the bids after a protest was filed, it still plans to implement the program as

scheduled. For employees signing up this year, FEDVIP coverage will begin December 31, 2006.

OPM Director Linda M. Springer says, "This new dental and vision program provides new healthcare choices for the Federal family. Those covered will be able to enroll for comprehensive dental benefits, comprehensive vision benefits or both, and employees will be able to use pre-tax payroll deductions to acquire their additional dental and vision benefits."
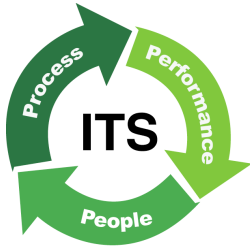
Teeth, Eyes, & FEDVIP, continued from page 10.

In addition to the self and family options, which we are all used to from the regular health insurance, employees signing up for FEDVIP will have a *self plus one other person option.* Unlike our regular health benefits, the Government will not pay any portion of the premiums. The law establishing FEDVIP, however, gives OPM broad contracting authority to obtain attractive rates by leveraging the purchasing power of Federal enrollees. In this regard, FEDVIP will be similar to another relatively recent addition to our benefits package—long-term care insurance.

You'll have a chance to sign up for the new supplemental dental and vision benefits during this year's Health Benefits Open Season, which runs November 13—December 11. Expect much more information before the open season starts.

2006 Federal Human Capital Survey

The U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has launched the 2006 Federal Human Capital Survey (FHCS), which will be sent to a sample of federal employees through the end of August. The FHCS includes 84 items intended to gauge employee perceptions on whether they are effectively led and managed, if they have opportunities to grow professionally and advance in their careers, and if their contributions are truly valued and recognized.

More than 400,000 employees in approximately 80 departments and agencies across the Executive Branch will be invited to participate in the FHCS. Some 30,000 of these will be in USDA, so your chances of getting a survey are pretty good.

OPM Director Linda M. Springer said, "Following OPM's administration of the first two surveys in 2002 and 2004, we have implemented a number of human capital improvements across the federal government. The 2006 FHCS will tell agency leaders how far they've come in creating better working environments for employees and what remains to be done."

Surveys typically will be sent to participants electronically, and employees may complete them during work hours. The USDA response rate for the 2004 survey was 60%, well above the Government-wide average of 54%. The results of the 2004 survey are available at:

http://www.fhcs2004.opm.gov/Reports.asp .

FEDERAL HUMAN CAPITAL SURVEY 2004

Chart from the 2004 Survey: the 2004 Response Rate by Agency. USDA had 60% participation.