

## **New Hire Perspectives and Strategies**

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*These perspectives were prepared by an experienced ARS ad hoc panel Chair, and are provided for selecting official use in recruiting Category 1 scientists. Detailed policies on ad hoc panel review requirements are explained in P&P 431.3-ARS, Exhibit 2.*

Recruitment of talented new scientists into ARS represents both an opportunity and a challenge, and is an ongoing necessity to assure the Agency maintains the strongest possible scientific workforce over time. Prospective New Hires with limited research experience (usually new Ph.D.'s and those with some postdoctoral training) will generally impact at either the GS-11 or GS-12 grade. Because these grades can be assigned without panel review by Human Resources Specialists in the ARS Human Resources Division, Agency managers making such hires often rely on their Human Resources Specialist to assign the appropriate grade. However, if the anticipated grade level is at or above GS-13, the case must be reviewed by an RPES Panel; only a panel can assign grade GS-13, -14, or -15. Due to time pressures, New Hire candidates projected to grade at these levels are evaluated by ad hoc panels. In most instances, a given panel is convened specifically to evaluate a single prospective New Hire.

### **Ad Hoc Panels**

These panels work much the same as regular RPES panels. An ad hoc panel consists of five members including a Chair, three scientists as panelists (one of whom serves as the Indepth Reviewer, or IDR), and a Personnel Representative. The IDR gathers facts for the evaluation and prepares a draft panel report (ARS-516) in the usual manner. The ad hoc panel convenes via teleconference and makes the appropriate classification decision. Although the purpose of ad hoc panels is to make grade classifications at the GS-13 and above level, it is not unusual for an ad hoc panel to classify a proposed New Hire as a GS-12. Such represents neither a mistake in judgment on the part of the submitting Agency manager nor a waste of the ad hoc panel's time. New Hires should always be brought onboard at the grade level merited, and in those situations where it is reasonably believed that a prospective New Hire will impact at the GS-13 level, the case should be evaluated by an ad hoc panel.

The Agency often has the opportunity to recruit mid- and senior-level scientists who have substantial and productive previous research experience with academia, industry, or other government agencies. In these situations, the issue is not if the New Hire will impact at GS-13 versus GS-12; rather, the issue is impact at the GS-13 versus GS-14 or even GS-15 level. Clearly, strong New Hire candidates must be subjected to an ad hoc panel for the appropriate grade determination.

Ad hoc panelists know what they are doing and why. They know that the prospective New Hire has already been selected by Agency managers as the best qualified person available for the position in question, and panelists want to do their part to help the Agency recruit the individual. Panelists know that the grade level they assign will usually be a significant factor and, possibly, even the determining factor in whether or not recruitment will be successful. Nevertheless, the panel must make its assessment on the basis of the evaluation materials at hand, along with IDR

factfinding. The grade level assigned by the panel must be consistent with and justified by criteria established in the U.S. Office of Personnel Management Research Grade Evaluation Guide (RGEG).

## **Perspectives**

On the basis of many years experience with ad hoc panels, we have gained insights that will hopefully be of value in helping Agency managers assure that prospective New Hires are evaluated properly and that merited grade levels are assigned. As with RPES panel review of in-house ARS scientists, the prospective New Hire's documentation of scientific stature, recognition, and impact is determinative of the score assigned in Factor IV and, ultimately, is largely determinative of the grade level assigned. However, there are special circumstances associated with more highly accomplished New Hire selectees which may make documentation of stature, recognition, and impact more difficult.

New Hire selectees seldom understand the RPES system and, if not given good counsel and close guidance during the preparation of case materials, are unlikely to provide the ad hoc panel with a thorough and effective package of evaluation materials. And while ARS scientists always have months of advance notice in case preparation, New Hire selectees seldom have more than a few weeks (and sometimes only a few days) to prepare their evaluation materials. Finally, accomplished scientists who have done their work outside of ARS often do not fit the mold of the RPES system. New Hire selectees must assure that the evaluation materials provided to the panel effectively communicate the nature, extent, and impact of their work. This requires careful forethought, organization, and creativity. The role of the selecting official is critical in assuring that evaluation materials are complete and compelling.

## **Concerns By Some**

Concern is occasionally voiced by some ARS managers that the RPES system, as applied to prospective New Hires, is not fully effective in recognizing and giving credit for the unique work situations often associated with academic, industry, and other government agency environments. Some believe that ad hoc panels force New Hire selectees into the mold of the standard RPES case writeup format and associated expectations. They may also believe this unfairly penalizes those who have done their work outside ARS.

In reality, ad hoc panelists fully consider the special circumstances associated with each prospective New Hire being evaluated. Panelists know that academic institutions place little emphasis on senior authorship by their senior staff, and that students or postdocs are usually first author on publications. Panelists know that university professors who have substantial amounts of their time dedicated to teaching or other nonresearch activities will show less scientific productivity than if had they been full-time researchers. Panelists also know that industry scientists are almost always limited in their ability to publish their work, and that even highly talented and accomplished industry researchers will probably have far fewer publications than

similarly talented and accomplished ARS researchers. They know that scientists from other federal or state research organizations often disseminate the results of their work primarily through technical reports or other non-traditional outlets, rather than the widely circulated journals generally used by ARS scientists.

Ad hoc panelists understand that they must consider the productivity and other accomplishments of prospective New Hires in context with the special circumstances of each individual's non-ARS work environment. On the basis of that analysis, panelists make a projection of what that individual would reasonably have accomplished in the ARS environment, and what he or she will reasonably accomplish once on board. Factor IV is scored accordingly, and then Factors I, II, and III are scored in the usual manner.

**Format Options** [<http://www.afm.ars.usda.gov/rpes/Factor IV Options.pdf>]

It rests primarily with the prospective New Hire to provide the panel with sufficient factual information and perspectives in the submitted evaluation materials, so the panel can make proper analyses and draw proper conclusions. It is certainly true that the IDR report takes on added significance in New Hire evaluations. And, it is imperative that the selectee provide the panel with a list of IDR contacts who can and will substantiate the quality, depth, and impact of the selectee's work. This is particularly important in those circumstances where the selectee's scientific work is either not readily accessible or is disseminated in non-traditional forums but for good reason. There are two permitted formats for submission of New Hire evaluation materials. First is the case writeup in standard Agency format, referred to as a "full-blown" writeup. If this option is chosen, the selecting official must be an integral part of the process to assure that the submittal is complete and persuasively written. Prospective New Hires are poorly served by standard format submittals which are prepared hurriedly and with little attention to detail, accuracy, or completeness.

The second option is referred to as a "streamlined" writeup. In lieu of the standard Factor IV format, the streamlined writeup consists of the position description (Factors I through III-B) written by the selecting official; a current *vita* (including publications, presentations, etc.); a list of IDR contacts; and written narratives which describe in some detail the nature and impact of the New Hire selectee's *three* (3) most significant research, special assignment/project, technology transfer, and/or leadership accomplishments. Each accomplishment narrative must be accompanied by a *single* exhibit--usually a publication reprint, other report, letter from knowledgeable persons verifying impact, etc. There is considerable latitude in the content of streamlined writeups, but the package as a whole should convey clearly to the panel the nature of the New Hire selectee's previous work, his or her role in it, its impact, and the selectee's stature and recognition within the scientific community.

## Management Strategies

The importance of timely and effective input by interested Agency managers into ad hoc evaluations cannot be overstated. The affected Agency managers have the most to gain (or lose) from the decision of an ad hoc panel, and management input into the process can be crucial to a successful outcome from their standpoint. However, past experience has shown that key management officials are occasionally lax in their responsibilities, or they fail to proceed through the ad hoc evaluation process with the appropriate degree of perceptiveness, diligence, and creativity. This can lead to panel results which are perceived by management as disappointing, frustrating, or even inappropriate. Following are some strategies which astute managers can and should use:

**Meeting Salary Requirements:** Agency managers should understand that there are two ways to meet the base salary requirement of a prospective New Hire. One is through the grade level itself, and the other is through use of an advanced step within the next lower grade. Managers rightfully become advocates for their prospective New Hires, and we recognize it is tempting for managers to tell their New Hire selectee that they *think* he or she will score a certain grade, or that the manager will try to get the selectee a certain grade. Managers should avoid or deflect such discussions. Focusing on a specific grade level can lead to unfulfilled expectations and disappointment, and can even jeopardize the recruitment. The salary requirement is an important issue of discussion and negotiation between management and the prospective New Hire. However, it is not critical that salary needs be met through a specific grade versus a higher step of the next lower grade.

**Quality of Evaluation Submittals:** Even more so than for in-house ARS scientists, selecting officials must take an active role in assuring that evaluation materials submitted are effective, complete, and persuasive. It is not appropriate that this responsibility be borne solely by the New Hire selectee, since the selectee will have, at most, only vague familiarity with the RPES. It is unfair to the selectee and to the ad hoc panel, and can be counterproductive to ARS' best interests, to submit less than the best possible package of evaluation materials.

**Choice of Writeup Format:** The seemingly simple choice between full-blown and streamlined writeup options is more complicated than might first seem evident.

Selecting officials may conclude that submittal of case materials for a New Hire selectee will be more effective and more reader friendly to ad hoc panelists if submitted in the full-blown format. However, there are three significant considerations that may make the full-blown format an unwise choice. First, given time pressures and the selectee's lack of familiarity with the RPES system, full-blown writeups tend to be less well prepared and less persuasive than writeups panelists are accustomed to seeing from in-house ARS scientists. Second, New Hire full-blown writeups tend to have holes or relatively weak spots in them. This is simply because the selectee may be coming from an environment which does not encourage

activity/accomplishment in the various categories defined in the ARS case writeup format. Finally, experience over the past several years has shown that in at least half of the full-blown writeup submittals, the New Hire selectee has provided less than the permitted number of Demonstrated Accomplishments for the reasonably anticipated grade level.

These considerations are not as critical with a case which is likely to score at GS-12 or -13, but they become very noticeable and can be troublesome in situations involving a more highly accomplished selectee. Certainly, panelists would likely view them as signs of weakness were they to appear during the periodic mandatory evaluation of an in-house ARS scientist. Case submittal in streamlined format largely circumvents the above potential problems. Ad hoc panelists do not expect standard format case submittals. Selecting officials should therefore carefully consider each of these options, and not automatically select the full-blown writeup option.

**The "Needed" Grade Level:** This is a sensitive topic and is the single issue which can cause major disappointment to the New Hire selectee and to selecting officials; an ad hoc panel decision can even abort management plans.

Panelists understand the necessity of salary matching, and they know that current salary is often a valid indicator of scientific stature and recognition. However, grade level determinations must be in accord with the RGEG. Selecting officials must understand that ad hoc panels will not assign a grade simply because it is perceived to be needed by management. Selecting officials must also accept that there will be situations where salary requirements for New Hire selectees simply cannot be met. It is a fact, however, that an ad hoc panel will seldom classify a prospective New Hire at a grade lower than that required to allow ARS to match current salary, *if the panelists are aware of current salary*.

Some selecting officials have been less than astute in dealing with this issue. If selecting officials know salary to be a critical issue, it is in their interest to assure that the panelists are aware of the New Hire selectee's current salary. This is best handled in a low key manner through a streamlined writeup in which the selectee's current salary is indicated in the application materials. Ad hoc panelists, without exception, study these forms and the message will be sent. It is neither appropriate nor productive to tell the IDR or the Personnel Representative that management *must* have a certain grade.

## Summary

Ad hoc panels are critical to the successful recruitment of highly qualified new scientists into ARS. Ad hoc panelists recognize the pressures and special circumstances associated with New Hire recruitment, and strive to conduct evaluations fairly and with the Agency's best interests in mind. The effective input of selecting officials is critical in assuring a smooth process, in meeting reasonable management expectations, and in avoiding disappointments.