

**Introduction**

This brief report provides the findings of an evaluation of the new OPPDE awards program. In June 2001, changes were made to the OPPDE Awards program, based on the OPPDE Awards Committee recommendations. The major changes in the program were more emphasis on teamwork and team awards, increased transparency, more formal presentations, and more input from staff in suggesting awards and awardees. The purpose of this evaluation was to obtain feedback on these changes and to suggest improvements in the program.

**Methodology**

Responses from eighty-five (53%) OPPDE staff who completed an online survey were analyzed. The survey included questions from OPM and Civil Rights surveys conducted before the new awards program began which allowed for a pre-post comparison. Also studied were the awards given before and after the new program. A literature review also provided additional findings. The study questions addressed improving the timeliness of the awards process, making the process more visible, encouraging teamwork, involving more people in the process, holding supervisors more accountable, providing reinforcement for accomplishments and improving job satisfaction.

**Key Findings**

Respondents overwhelmingly support the new awards program. The new awards program has strongly improved the problems previously identified with

- transparency,
- communication about awards,
- awards presentation,
- employee involvement in recommending staff for awards.

Respondents were also positive about the team emphasis and improvements in the timeliness of the awards.

A majority of respondents were satisfied with the recognition they received and over half said that the opportunities to receive awards had increased.

The evaluation found less support for the following that merit further study and actions:

- level of award represents accomplishment,
- awards provide positive reinforcement,
- supervisors are held accountable in fair and equitable distribution of awards,
- employees have equal opportunity in assignment of work,
- financial resources are available for awards.

**Award Data**

The total number of awards given increased 60% over the past three years: 184 in FY1999, 232 in FY2000, and 294 in FY2001.

In 2001, the following awards were given

Monetary only	91
Combination money and time-off	90
Time-off only	51
Keepsake only	43
Performance bonus, time-off	12
Performance bonus, monetary	5
Lunch	2

While all types of awards increased, the biggest change occurred in the number of keepsake and monetary/combination awards.

An individual could receive more than one award: 187 individuals received at least one award. The average value of a monetary award was \$269 (median \$150) and the average time-off was 18 hours (median 11 hours).

From June to December 2001, 28 team awards were given to 181 individuals (62% of award recipients) and 113 individual awards given. \*

Most awards went to nonsupervisory professionals (71%), followed by administrative (17%) and supervisory (12%) personnel. This is very similar to their representation on the OPPDE staff. Most (232 – 79%) went to staff within OPPDE, with 62 to staff outside OPPDE.

A Special Study by OPM in 1998 provides a comparison of programs in other agencies. This study found a great deal of variance among agency awards programs in terms of numbers, types and size of awards. Most agencies do not monitor or evaluate award program results, employees had little confidence in programs, and funding was inadequate. With the variety of approaches there was no evidence of inequities based on race, sex, national origin, or other non-merit factors (see Reference 2).

**Respondent Views**

Many respondents to the awards survey were involved with the awards process either through nominating someone for the awards or staff discussion of awards. Most said they had some or a lot of knowledge about the awards process.

In expressing preferences for awards respondents ranked the following as highest:

- a step increase for the highest recognition,
- combination cash and time-off for standard recognition,
- combination cash and time-off for spot awards.

Cash remains most important to OPPDE employees, despite findings in some studies that employees are motivated more by the recognition itself than by a cash award (see Reference 7).

Aspects of the new program that respondents were most enthusiastic about included:

- staff participation in determining awards
- awards on Outlook
- emphasis on teams
- Deputy Administrator Award
- Supervisor’s Award

They do not like

- employee of the month
- lunch with nominator
- posting picture
- shadow assignment.

They are more evenly divided on

- special event to acknowledge awards
- team allocation of award
- Team Player Award

They favored no set allocation of awards for teams and individuals. They were divided on allocation of awards to staff outside OPPDE between no set amount or a percent less than twenty-five percent.

Most respondents were also satisfied with how they received their award and had no strong preferences about ways to receive the award. The most common method was to receive the awards at a staff meeting followed by receiving it from the initiator.

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\* Previous reports did not include a breakdown of team and individual awards.

Issues remaining include insufficient resources and perception that some supervisors are not fully participating. Said a respondent, “Just handing out notification of an award or a check to you in your office with little or no discussion does not conform to the intent of the awards program. Supervisor does not seem to be engaged in the program or facilitating team approaches to work activities”.

Added another, “Currently under the new awards system since there is a ‘team’ emphasis, supervisors can control an employees ability to be recognized by not assigning an employee to any projects thereby eliminating a person’s opportunity.”

Those not satisfied with the new program had concerns with criteria for awards and the relationship to performance.

Despite the overall positive response to the new awards program, there were no major changes from the responses to the OPM and Civil Rights surveys completed one year ago that found significant dissatisfaction with employee recognition. However, one might not expect dramatic changes in these indicators from a program that has been in place for only six months.

### Key Recommendations

Our survey findings, USDA guidelines, and the literature provide suggestions to address issues raised. The survey findings led to the recommendations below.

- Hold supervisors accountable by monitoring awards and assignments to teams.
- Provide more monetary resources for cash awards.

- Continue to monitor, modify, and follow-up awards program to assess success.
- Continue to monitor recipients to ensure deserving staff receive awards.
- Expand publicity about awards to include more information on reasons for awards.
- Clarify and further publicize the award program process and criteria.
- Provide more flexibility and choice in awards and presentation to recipients of awards. Allow recipients to accumulate points for awards and apply towards a choice of awards.
- Continue staff input into the awards process and suggestions for new awards. Have the Awards Committee consider and recommend new types of awards such as:
  - supervisor for the day
  - early leave
  - parking
  - a special “named” award
  - picture with Thermy
- Reconsider lunch with nominator, employee of the month and other award choices with less staff support.
- Establish no set allocation in awards for teams and individuals.
- Do not set limits on awards to individuals outside OPPDE.

- Assign more work to teams and ensure that all staff have access to team assignments.
- Encourage staff to make awards throughout the year, close to the time of the award deserving actions.

These recommendations are supported by the literature and USDA guidelines to:

- involve coworkers and customers in recognition decisions,
- simplify and standardize the system,
- give recognition for specific achievements,
- link recognition to agency mission,
- hold managers accountable,
- give recognition in a timely manner,
- emphasize group recognition,
- give employees a choice in recognition
- publicize recognition,
- produce an annual recognition report, and
- appoint a task force to monitor and evaluate agency systems.

## References

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