



United States Office of Personnel Management

Office of Merit Systems Oversight and Effectiveness
Digest of Significant Classification Decisions and Opinions
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Standard: [General Schedule Supervisory Guide](#) (April 1998)
Factor: Factor 5, Difficulty of Typical Work Directed
Issue: Alternative Method for Determining Difficulty of Typical Work Directed

Identification of the Classification Issue

This issue arose in an OPM oversight division because of a request for advice and assistance. The position was as a second level supervisor division chief over two separate and distinct staff functions. Three of the four subordinate branches performed two-grade interval operations work. Each of the three branches had one staff year of supervisory and related work, one of GS-12 specialist work, seven staff years of GS-11 specialist work, and an additional three to four staff years of technician and clerical support work. The fourth branch performed program and policy development work. It had one staff year of supervisory and related work, six staff years of GS-12 specialist work, and three staff years of technician and clerical support work. The higher graded operating unit specialists were used to supplement the fourth branch's staff in conducting some program and policy development projects. Management claimed the focus of the division chief's position was overseeing the program and policy development projects. The issue was whether the alternative method for base level determination for second and higher level supervisors was applicable to the division chief position.

Resolution

The GSSG defines this factor as measuring "the difficulty and complexity of the basic work most typical of the organization(s) directed, as well as other line, staff, or contracted work for which the supervisor has technical or oversight responsibility." For many second and higher level supervisors, this work is that which best characterizes the nature of the mission oriented nonsupervisory work in the organization constituting 25 percent or more of the workload of the organization as defined in the GSSG. It recognizes that sometimes "heavy supervisory or managerial workload related to work above the base level may be present." In those cases, the

GSSG permits using the “highest level of nonsupervisory work directed which requires at least 50 percent of the duty time of the supervisory position under evaluation” for this factor.

OPM found the alternative method was not appropriate for this position based on the presence and authority of intermediate levels of supervision and the limited number of staff years of higher graded work directed. As discussed in previous Digest cases (Digest No. 19, page 17, and Digest 20, page 15), the alternative method is not applicable for most second level and many higher level supervisors. First, the presence of and responsibilities of first and/or intervening level supervisors must be considered in assessing whether 50 percent or more of the second or higher level supervisor’s work time is devoted to overseeing work above the typical base level. The presence of a first level supervisor over the six staff years of program and policy staff work undermined the argument that the division chief spent 50 percent or more of the time overseeing that workload. OPM found that the program and policy work performed by the operating branch positions also had to be considered in this analysis. Even if an additional staff year of GS-12 level work from the operating units was dedicated to policy and program projects, the presence of the four subordinate supervisors had to be given appropriate weight in making this determination. Second, freedom from supervision inherent in the GS-12 level subordinate positions themselves undermined the likelihood that the division chief position devoted 50 percent of its time to overseeing the GS-12 workload. Third, OPM found that approximately 42 staff years of nonsupervisory work managed through four subordinate supervisors (assuming they performed supervisory duties 100 percent of the time) was not a “heavy supervisory or managerial workload” within the meaning of the GSSG.

OPM contrasted these circumstances with that of a manager over a medium-sized field activity with 370 staff years of operating and program and policy development work performed for both internal and external purposes. The manager functioned as the third level supervisor over three operating divisions and as the second level supervisor over the program and policy development division assigned 70 staff years of work. The operating divisions performed a mixture of two-grade interval, high level technician, and clerical work. The heavy technician workload resulted in a GS-8 base level. Much of the work was routine, and the division heads were delegated broad authorities in managing their assigned workload. In contrast, the program and policy development division consisted of two branches, each of which used three team leaders to help guide the work. The program and policy development work produced a GS-11 base level. Many projects required coordination with other organizations and used cross-activity matrix managed work teams. Those teams drew personnel from within the activity and from related field activities of the agency.

OPM found the medium-size field activity had two separate and distinct missions. Each was managed differently. The delegation of responsibility and accountability to the operating division chiefs limited the activity head’s day-to-day involvement in all but the most contentious operating program issues. Although the program and policy development work constituted a smaller portion of the activity workload, its externally oriented nature required continuous involvement by the activity head. The team-based work structure and limited subordinate supervisory workforce

in that division provided a setting in which substantial ongoing managerial involvement by the activity head was likely and credible. Thus, OPM found that the activity head's position was evaluated properly under the alternative method for determining the difficulty of work directed.