Deputy Administrator's Listening Post
February 27, 2008
Minutes

T&A's:

QUESTION:

Is there a plan in the works (in STAR Web or at HQ) that would provide timekeepers a way to track Travel Comp time (the employee having to use up a certain number of hours before their 26 pay periods are up)? Having to keep up with it manually gets very confusing, is not efficient, and very time consuming. There may even be something in place now that we are not aware of.

ANSWER:

Comp-time reports are being sent to the Area Personnel Assistants quarterly. Reports were sent out in 2007 in pay periods 12, 19, and 26, and this will continue. The comp-time report lists all employees with outstanding comp-time balances. This includes regular comp-time as well as comp-time for travel. The report identifies the employee and their organization code; the number of hours of comp-time by type and pay period earned; and the rate of pay for the regular comp-time. Employees whose comp-time for travel will expire within the next 6 pay periods are highlighted in the report.

Comp-travel if not taken within 26 pay periods is forfeited. While the NFC database drops the forfeited hours, the Star-Web T&A system does not. If an employee then takes the forfeited hours, it results in a leave error. Also, timekeepers can help themselves by checking their leave error report in Star Web every pay period and correcting comp-time balances as forfeited leave is reflected in the error report.

As of pay period 10 of last year (2007), the rules on the use and payment of regular comp-time changed. Regular Comp-time is now to be paid out to employees if not used within 26 pay periods. Before, the comp-time was paid to the employee if not used, but only at year end of the second leave year after it was earned. As such it was easier to manage and one comp-time report was sent to our customers near the end of the leave year. Now, comp-time can expire any pay period of the year, resulting in the need to make a payment to the employee through an AD-581 Lump-sum leave form.

As a suggestion, supervisors may require employees to use all regular comp-time before being approved for annual or other leave such as credit time (however, not sick leave).

QUESTION:

Why can't the AO's have access to TINQ to make T&A error corrections?

ANSWER:

TINQ access rights cannot be limited by location; i.e., anyone who has access to TINQ can see the entire Agency. Therefore, the access is limited to one per Area plus HRD staff. To facilitate the error correction process, the AO's may want to consider reviewing the leave audit prepared by the Timekeepers as the basis for the error correction before sending it to the Area Office. Inaccurate leave audits may cause a delay in processing the leave error corrections.

Mandatory Training

QUESTION:

Is there any way that this can be done every 2-3 years instead of every year? It's getting overwhelming, e.g. Civil Rights training (two modules), Ethics training (three modules), IT Security Training (two modules), and soon to come ADODR training. Perhaps there's a need for comprehensive training initially, but what about only "changes" being addressed annually or refresher training every 2-3 years?

ANSWER:

Unfortunately, these requirements are out of our control. Do the best you can to work through them. Use the CD version if AgLearn access continues to be a problem. In response to the concern about students that come and go, use of the CD may be more appropriate and expeditious.

QUESTION:

ADODR Training in AgLearn: We were briefed yesterday this is also going to be an "annual" requirement for ADODRs. Here again, if they have been given initial training, then why not have the training good for at least 3 years. Also, because ADODR's are required to take Ethics training, could the training somehow be consolidated? I'm certain that ARS has some control over an annual requirement here.

ANSWER:

The Ethics Training is sponsored by the Department, so it falls in the same category as mandatory training just addressed.

For the ADODR training, the plan is to require this training on an annual basis for the first few years, as agreed upon by the entire Administrative and Financial Management Council (AFMC) at the Auburn AFMC meeting last year. Once we can establish a marked improvement on how our ADODRs are performing; i.e., using SCAs appropriately, monitoring cooperator's progress

appropriately, ensuring receipt of all deliverables, etc., the training schedule will be revised to be required for all new ADODRs and then only maintenance training for existing ADODRs.

IT Chargebacks

QUESTION:

In the past, the licensing was covered by ARS or possibly Department? Why can't some of the money from the 10% Agency overhead cover or help defray these costs? The budget is not optimistic for ARS in FY09, not to mention what it may look like beyond that. Jim you know that discretionary dollars are being squeezed for the scientists, and we can't forget that we wouldn't be here if it wasn't for the science. Each time we have an assessment, it nibbles a little more cheese. Perhaps you could simply voice the fields concern to Dr. Knipling.

ANSWER:

This IT chargeback was initiated at the request of Drs. Knipling and Betschart. It is in fact the cost of the location level software licensing that previously was paid for by ARS Headquarters; however, due to budget constraints both Dr's. Knipling and Betschart have asked that where costs are directly identifiable to the field, they should be borne by the field. ARS headquarters already pays over $25 million in Agency wide central agency costs (Green book and WCF) on behalf of the entire agency, such as all costs related to NFC operations and systems for finance, payroll, procurement, travel, etc. Telephones, unemployment and workers compensation, HSPD 12 implementation, and all other Departmental initiatives are paid centrally on behalf of all locations. Further, we continue to pay many ARS network costs centrally; over $5 million of ARS network costs that benefit the entire agency are borne centrally.

Software licensing, security, firewalls, T1 lines, circuitry, testing equipment, etc. will continue to cost the agency money, but the good news is that the method we employ to pay the licensing centrally and then distribute the costs back to the locations, saves a lot of dollars by taking advantage of bulk rate discounts. If each location were to acquire such software individually it would be much more expensive for the Agency.

GovTrip

QUESTION:

At the GovTrip training, we were told that use of non-refundable tickets was no longer allowed and that it wasn't "turned on" for ARS. Is this correct? Can we use them?

ANSWER:

This is not correct. We still may use non-refundable tickets through GovTrip.

QUESTION:

We are now being charged for the voucher fee that we didn't have to pay for in the past. Why?

ANSWER:

Previously, voucher processing costs were centrally financed by the agency in the Departmental Greenbook assessments. Under GovTrip, the voucher fee will be incorporated into each travel claim. More details on this and other information regarding the transition to GovTrip can be found in Bulletin 08-301 on the AFM website, Virtual Library or at the following link: http://www.afm.ars.usda.gov/ppweb/Bulletins/08-301.pdf .