

POCKET
FEDERAL CAREER
GUIDE



U.S. SECRETARY OF LABOR ELAINE L. CHAO



Office of the 21st Century Workforce

**U.S. Department of Labor
200 Constitution Avenue N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20210**

Office of the 21st Century Workforce

Karen M. Czarnecki, Director

Bettye B. Samuels, Deputy Director

Alan R. Severson, Senior Counsel

S. Chancellor Dennison, Staff Assistant

Colin Gowan, Staff Assistant

Leah Lattimer, Staff Assistant

Silvia Pavia, Staff Assistant

POCKET FEDERAL CAREER GUIDE

Successful Federal Job Applications

1

Promote Cross-Cultural Communications

2

Balance Soft Skills and Hard Skills for Success on the Job

3

Become A Better Public Speaker

4

Workplace Rules for Success

5

Effective Networking

6

Develop Leadership Skills

7

Manage Conflict in the Workplace .

8

Best Practices for Federal Agency Performance

9

Applying for the Senior Executive Service

10



Successful Federal Job Applications

Essential steps for a successful Federal job application include:

- **Research the job and the employer:** Utilize government agency Web sites. There are several sources of information on Federal jobs, including USAJobs.gov, Federal government columns in newspapers, and the *Congressional Record*;
- **Determine the skills required:** Examine the agency mission statement, the occupation listed, the position description, and the organizational chart;
- **Gather personal information:** Examine past job descriptions, performance ratings, and volunteer experience, and review basic interests, values and abilities relevant to the job;
- **Identify accomplishments:** Include skills learned and results achieved in previous positions. Accomplishment statements should include specific, measurable actions taken, with two or three examples per position, as well as identification of situations that presented a challenge and the actions taken to address them; and
- **Tailor the application to the job:** Focus on the knowledge, skills and abilities required, and use the agency's terminology when providing relevant examples of accomplishments.

Promote Cross-Cultural Communications

The role of culture, assumptions and stereotypes in organizations, and the impact of language, perceptions, attitudes and behaviors when communicating with government or any other organization must be acknowledged, particularly in today's diverse and multicultural workforce. Cross-cultural communicators must:

- Tailor their message to the audience to achieve maximum persuasion;
- Maintain composure;
- Examine cultural case studies that demonstrate lessons learned;
- Identify skills, techniques and strategies that really connect with culturally diverse audiences; and
- Encourage development of powerful government communicators at all levels.

The key to successful cross-cultural communication is knowledge of and appreciation for different cultures, as well as your own. Heightened cultural awareness enables individuals to:

- See the world through multiple perspectives;
- Enhance communication and interpersonal skills;
- Understand and appreciate diverse communities;
- Better explore their own cultural identity and its impact on world view; and
- Advance career development through knowledge and understanding of different cultures.

To maximize cross-cultural understanding at all levels of an organization, the workforce itself must be culturally diverse, so it is vital for government and private organizations alike to tap into and retain a diverse pool of top talent by:

- Understanding demographic changes in the workforce;
- Educating staff that “diversity” is not the same as “minority”;
- Building long-term relationships with ethnically diverse organizations;
- Learning how to effectively interview diverse groups;
- Ensuring retention by developing a diversity-friendly work culture;
- Fostering a culturally sensitive work environment; and
- Networking for strategic alliances to enable long-term diversity recruitment.

2

Learning these concepts of cross-cultural communication allows us to form accurate perceptions and limit misguided assumptions. It is important to think about attitudes and personal habits for successful cross-cultural communication and begin to model behaviors that generate more positive perceptions of people from diverse backgrounds.



*“Leadership is not simply taking charge.
Leadership is gaining the respect of peers and
persuading them to follow you. It requires
building trust and the ability to motivate and
inspire others.”*

- The Honorable Elaine L. Chao
U.S. Secretary of Labor

Balance Soft Skills and Hard Skills for Success on the Job

- Success on the job requires a combination of soft skills, or interpersonal qualities, and hard skills or job-specific skills to perform the job itself.
- While both soft and hard skills are essential, their relative importance may vary as careers progress.
- Soft skills often become more crucial as a career progresses higher in an organization, usually because an individual at that point is likely to be called on to manage others, thus placing more demands on interpersonal skills.

3





Become A Better Public Speaker

Making the most of every speaking opportunity places you at a competitive advantage when seeking to improve skills, enhance portfolios, and demonstrate well-rounded experience. Whether presenting to an agency head, negotiating with a contractor, or conducting internal meetings, make sure your presentation is:

- **Structured and clearly defined:** Let the audience know at the beginning what your subject is and why it is important;

- **Enthusiastic:** You feel strongly about it, so make the audience feel your energy and persuasion;
- **Connected:** Build conversational rapport with your audience and put them on your team;
- **Confident:** Show the audience that you are thoroughly prepared and have a firm grasp of your topic;
- **Informed:** Offer the most up-to-date information about the topic and do your homework on who the audience is and why they are there; and
- **Rehearsed:** Public speaking needs practice and there are hundreds of opportunities everyday to fine-tune your skills and make it look easy.

In addition:

- **Know Your Audience:** It is vital to know as much as possible about the audience you are addressing, so do your homework and tailor remarks appropriately to educate, inform and inspire your audience.
- **Hold Yourself Responsible:** Do what it takes to ensure that the audience understands and remembers your presentation – and hold yourself responsible for getting the message across.



Workplace Rules for Success

Many believe that working hard is all that is necessary to advance their careers. Although hard work is essential, excellent performers can find themselves falling short of their career objectives. Workplace requirements that must be understood in order to maximize wins, minimize losses, and achieve professional goals include:

- **Educate yourself:** The right educational credentials can get your foot in the door and open up new paths for career advancement;
- **Complete assigned tasks on time with top quality:** This is a must for career success, so do it consistently;
- **Build an image:** It is important to look and act the part to help ensure that you get your next opportunity;
- **Maximize exposure:** Who knows you and whom you know is important;
- **Cultivate a mentor:** Promotions may be based on someone's perception of your potential, so have a mentor who raises your profile and discusses your potential with you; and
- **Communicate:** Develop the verbal and nonverbal people skills that are important to getting your message across.



Effective Networking

Networking is one of the most important activities that jobseekers and those pursuing advancement in their careers use to expand their circle of influence and help ensure success.

Most job openings are never advertised, so it is vital to have a network of contacts – a career network – providing support, information, and job leads. The key to successful networking is to overcome the reluctance to ask for help and designate the time to enlist others to become advocates on your behalf.

People in the network may be able to:

- provide job leads;
- offer advice and information about a particular company or industry; and
- introduce you to others in a way that expands the network itself.

Some of the best ways to network are:

- attend professional meetings;
- participate in community events; and
- cultivate mentors.

Effectively focus energy on networking by:

- getting organized with a business card file or computer database;
- staying in touch with contacts via regular phone calls, email and perhaps holiday greetings; and
- setting specific goals for the number of daily, weekly, or monthly contacts.

Regularly reaching out to business, community, and personal contacts keeps a person on top of trends and on the minds of those who may be able to offer a promotion, better job, referral, or at least a hot tip. And never take your network for granted. It is always vital to say “thanks.”

“Technical proficiency is the foundation for advancement, but that is only the beginning. Learning how to be a good leader is critical to career advancement in large, complex organizations like the Federal government.”

“Leadership is not collecting credentials. It is not an accumulation of degrees and awards. It is an activity that achieves results. And like any other skill, leadership can be learned and practiced.”

- The Honorable Elaine L. Chao
U.S. Secretary of Labor

Develop Leadership Skills

Leadership in the Federal government is about more than a job title and a grade level. Leaders are expected to develop a vision for what they and their team can accomplish for their agency and to use their leadership skills to carry out that vision. It is important to:

- Recognize personal leadership goals and desires;
- Think about the steps, practice and processes necessary for successfully linking leadership to management goals; and
- Model leadership behaviors that generate positive perceptions and interactions at work.

The tasks most closely linked to leadership include the ability to:

- Listen and show understanding;
- Identify developmental needs;
- Promote teamwork;
- Address work-related conflict in a work group; and
- Respect colleagues.

These findings are consistent with research by the Gallup Corporation showing that the single greatest influence on an employee's engagement with work and morale is his or her immediate supervisor. According to Gallup, leaders that foster high morale and productivity:

- Convey clear work expectations;
- Provide recognition and praise;
- Listen to employee opinions;
- Encourage employee development; and
- Create a sense of caring for employees as individuals.



Manage Conflict in the Workplace

- If turf wars, disagreements and differences of opinion escalate into interpersonal conflict, it is important to intervene immediately.
- In conflict-ridden situations, mediation skills and interventions are critical to effective leadership and achievement of organizational goals.
- Not all conflict is negative, and conflict resolution can be an opportunity for growth in a work environment.
- Recognize the characteristics of constructive and destructive conflict, and know how to use appropriate conflict resolution tools such as:
 - ✓ **High-ground tools:** the most successful in resolving workplace conflict, including facts or statements of existence, communication that dissects facts, delineation of the scope of responsibilities, and communication of duties or job descriptions; and
 - ✓ **Middle-ground tools:** less likely to be successful in resolving workplace conflict, but include statements of worth and ability, and comments that refer to the individual's level of competence.
- Stay composed, avoid a “shoot from the hip” response to a workplace provocation, and develop the ability to view personality issues for what they often really are: performance issues.
- With greater awareness of emotional triggers, individuals become more sensitive to others and enhance the ability to listen, anticipate needs, create bonds, manage conflict, and achieve teamwork that is the hallmark of organizational success.

The image features a blue gradient background. In the center, the word "STRATEGY" is written in large, bold, white, sans-serif capital letters. The letters have a slight 3D effect with a shadow. Behind the text, there are several dark blue silhouettes of chess pieces, including a king, a queen, a rook, and a knight, arranged in a way that suggests a strategic game. The overall composition is clean and professional, emphasizing the theme of strategy.

STRATEGY

Best Practices for Federal Agency Performance

- **Hire the best people with the right talents and skills to get the job done.** Attracting highly-qualified people to public service is important, but even more crucial is understanding the extent to which an employee is well-matched to his or her job;
- **The government workplace must be energetic, engaged and using its abilities to deliver maximum results.** The employee's level of commitment to the agency's mission and the sense that his or her work makes a difference are vital to workplace success;
- **Strong leadership is crucial to improved performance.** Some of the measures of leadership effectiveness include attrition or turnover of top performers and the extent to which leaders develop and advance top performers;
- **Cultivate public support.** Public attitudes toward government in general and the Federal government in particular have a direct bearing on the quality of public service performance and are a key factor in recruitment efforts;
- **Invest in the best systems and structure.** These are vital to enabling or inhibiting Federal employees from top performance, because even the best, most highly motivated people will not succeed if the systems and structures in which they operate hold them back; and
- **Insist on accountability.** Obviously, government outcomes are tougher to document than private sector "bottom line" financial results, but strict accountability for performance actually contributes to better performance, more successful recruitment efforts, and stronger public support.

Applying for the Senior Executive Service

Have you:

- *Made use of the resources and information on the OPM Web site?*
- *Written the ECQ statements?*
- *Asked another person to proofread those statements?*
- *Identified gaps or areas for improvement?*
- *Developed a plan or strategy to acquire needed elements?*
- *Interviewed an SES supervisor for insight and advice?*
- *Sought formal and informal developmental opportunities?*
- *Looked for assignments beyond current expertise to broaden experience and horizons?*
- *Volunteered for projects that require leadership skills?*
- *Found a mentor within SES in your workplace?*

Qualify for the Senior Executive Service

Supervisory positions in the Federal government require a different skill set than non-management technical positions. The Senior Executive Service (SES) was created to comprise the management team empowered to achieve agency goals. To find the best applicants for SES positions, the Executive Core Qualifications (ECQ) must be met:

- **Leading change:** SES members motivate managers under their supervision to use vision, strategic planning, and quality management. They design and implement new or cutting-edge programs or processes, and display a high level of initiative;
- **Leading people:** SES members design and implement strategies to maximize employee potential, and develop employees and leaders. They should inspire, motivate, guide, and empower their subordinates, fostering high ethical standards. To this end, SES supervisors provide performance expectations and regular feedback to those they lead;
- **Results-driven:** SES members focus on strategic plans, goals, and standards that

deliver results. They hold themselves and others accountable for timely and effective decisions which reflect quality and customer needs. Because they are responsible for taxpayer resources, SES members must administer these financial, material, informational, and human resources in a manner that instills public trust and accomplishes the organization's mission;

- **Business acumen:** SES members demonstrate that they have the skills and judgment required by the job and are able to share that knowledge with subordinates;
- **Good communication:** SES members are good communicators and build coalitions by negotiating with individuals and groups. They effectively represent and speak for their organization and express facts and ideas in a convincing manner.

Even with ECQs in place, as well as the skill, intelligence, energy and the determination to land an SES position, a winning application package is also necessary. The U.S. Office of Personnel Management established the SES Federal Candidate Development Program (CDP), a government-wide effort to train outstanding leaders of the future for the Federal government. CDP helps agencies meet their personnel planning goals and create a high-quality SES corps. The basic SES package includes:

- **Cover letter:** While not mandatory, a cover letter is a considerate gesture comparable to the letter of interest that most employers look for in potential employees. Private industry job applications nearly always expect a cover letter. This is an opportunity to write about your interest in the position and to state why you think you are an excellent candidate for the position;
- **Federal Resume:** SES job announcements allow you to use a resume, SF-171, OF-612, or any format you choose. The resume, however, is often more versatile and better looking as a presentation of executive qualifications and experience than the application form;
- **Mandatory Managerial or Technical Factors:** It is important to carefully read the job announcement for these factors. SES announcements always list two to three managerial factors and two to three technical factors, all of which require short statements addressing each of them.

Those who complete the CDP program and obtain certification by an SES Qualifications Review Board are then eligible for selection to an SES position anywhere in the Federal government without further competition.



United States Department of Labor
<http://www.dol.gov>