

U.S. Office of Personnel Management
Division for Human Capital Leadership & Merit System Accountability
Classification Appeals Program

Chicago Field Services Group
230 S. Dearborn Street, DPN-30-6
Chicago, IL 60604-1687

Classification Appeal Decision
Under section 5112 of title 5, United States Code

Appellant: [appellant]
[appellant]

Agency classification: Human Resources Assistant
(Info Sys/OA)
GS-203-6

Organization: Human Resources and Staff
Development Service
VA [location] Health Care System
Veterans Health Administration
Department of Veterans Affairs
[location]

OPM decision: Human Resources Assistant
(Employee Benefits/
Information Systems)
GS-203-7

OPM decision number: C-0203-07-01

Michael J. Wilkin
Deputy Associate Director
Center for Merit System Compliance

August 17, 2005

Date

As provided in section 511.612 of title 5, Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), this decision constitutes a certificate that is mandatory and binding on all administrative, certifying, payroll, disbursing, and accounting officials of the Government. The agency is responsible for reviewing its classification decisions for identical, similar, or related positions to ensure consistency with this decision. There is no right of further appeal. This decision is subject to discretionary review only under conditions and time limits specified in the *Introduction to the Position Classification Standards*, appendix 4, section G (address provided in appendix 4, section H).

Since this decision changes the grade of the appealed position, it is to be made effective no later than the beginning of the fourth pay period after the date of this decision (5 CFR 511.702). The servicing human resources office must submit a compliance report containing the corrected position description and Standard Form 50 showing the personnel action taken. The report must be submitted within 30 days from the effective date of the personnel action.

Decision sent to:

[appellants address]

Chief, Human Resources and Staff Development Service
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Introduction

On December 21, 2004, the Chicago Field Services Group of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) accepted a classification appeal from [appellants]. They occupy identical additional positions (hereinafter referred to as position), currently classified as Human Resources (HR) Assistant (Information Systems/Office Automation), GS-203-6, in the Human Resources and Staff Development Service, at the Veterans Affairs' [location] Healthcare System (VA[location]HCS), located in [location], which is part of Veterans Integrated Service Network [#] (VISN [#] in [location]. The appellants believe their position should be reclassified as HR Assistant (Employee Benefits), GS-203-7. [appellant] was designated to represent [appellant] and herself as the lead appellant. We received the complete agency administrative report on April 26, 2005. We accepted and decided this appeal under section 5112 of title 5, United States Code (U.S.C.).

To help decide the appeal, we conducted a telephone audit with the lead appellant on February 24, 2005, and a telephone interview with her immediate supervisor, Mr. Michael L. Palmier, on March 1, 2005, with several more contacts with him via email. We also contacted VISN [#] to verify the nature of HR support provided to the [location] office, and VA's HQ's Office of Human Resources Management and Labor Relations to determine the delegated HR authorities at healthcare system and medical centers. In reaching our decision, we carefully considered the audit and interview findings and all information of record furnished by the appellants and the agency.

General issues

The appellants occupy position description (PD) [number]. The appellants' PD was revised on September 25, 2004, based on a desk audit conducted on July 14, 2004. Both the appellants and their supervisor have certified to its accuracy, but the appellants disagree with the grade-level determination and the parenthetical designations assigned to the official position title. The appellants appealed the classification of their position directly to OPM. They believe that their position should include the parenthetical (Employee Benefits), since they spend the majority of their time dealing with employee benefits issues without support from any local or VISN level HR specialist which they say is a unique situation within VA. They are organizationally aligned under Staffing and Processing but say they should be aligned under Employee Benefits instead, since it is more reflective of the kind of work they do on a daily basis. They also state that the type of work they perform is materially different than similarly situated employees assigned to like positions within VISN [#].

A PD is the official record of the major duties and responsibilities assigned to a position by a responsible agency official; i.e., a person with authority to assign work to a position. A position is the duties and responsibilities that make up the work performed by an employee. Classification appeal regulations permit OPM to investigate or audit a position and decide an appeal based on the duties assigned by management and performed by the employee. We classify a real operating position, and not simply the PD. Therefore, this decision is based on the actual work assigned to and performed by the appellants.

Implicit in the appellants' rationale is a concern that their position is classified inconsistently with other positions. The appellants believe their work is materially different from similarly situated employees assigned to GS-203-6 positions within VISN [#], because they believe that they perform more difficult and complex work. By law, we must classify positions solely by comparing current duties and responsibilities to OPM standards and guidelines (5 U.S.C. 5106, 5107, and 5112). Since the comparison to standards is the exclusive method for classifying positions, we cannot compare the appellants' position to others as a basis for deciding the appeal.

The appellants mentioned that their performance plan has not been updated since their position was audited on July 14, 2004. However, this concern is not reviewable under the classification appeal process.

The appellants also make various other statements about their agency and its evaluation of their position. Because our decision sets aside all previous agency decisions, the appellants' concerns regarding their agency's classification review process are not germane to this decision. In adjudicating this appeal, our only concern is to make our own independent decision based on the proper classification of the position.

Position information

The appellants work under the general supervision of the Director (locally called the Administrative Services Manager), HR and Staff Development Service, who has been delegated full authority and responsibility for planning, directing, and coordinating all HR programs, as well as overseeing its internal HR evaluation efforts at the VA[location]HCS in [location]. Because of recent staff shortages, a consolidated classification unit at VISN [#] assists health care and medical centers with the position classification work, but final classification authority has been retained by the VA[location]HCS along with all of its other delegated HR authorities. VA[location]HCS is part of VISN [#] which is also comprised of medical centers in [locations,]. The Administrative Services Manager supervises 11 employees, including an Administrative Support Assistant, GS-303-7, three HR specialists GS-201-11, three HR assistants, GS-203-7 (OA), and two HR Assistants (Info Sys/OA), GS-203-6, (who are the appellants), and one Employee Relations Specialist, GS-201-9, who handles the workmen's compensation program, and one supervisory HR specialist, GS-201-12, who oversees the Employee and Nursing Education and the Library functions.

The Administrative Services Manager has full line authority for all Federal HR programs including employee benefits for approximately 1,100 employees and their beneficiaries at VA[location]HCS in [location]. The appellants administer an extensive employee benefits program providing guidance to supervisors, employees, and relatives about the Federal Employee Health Benefits (FEHB) Program, the Thrift Savings Plan (TSP), Federal Employee Group Life Insurance (FEGLI) Program, long-term care insurance, flexible spending accounts, and unemployment insurance (with the exception of workers' compensation performed by an HR Specialist), as well as the Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS), regular and offset, the Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS), and Social Security under the Federal Insurance Contributions Act (FICA). They provide additional assistance for retirement issues, such as,

preparation of annuity estimates, and the actual processing of retirements and related disability retirements, social security, and death cases.

The appellants are required to resolve a wide range of problems associated with employee benefits and retirement matters. They interview employees and beneficiaries to develop facts; gather and analyze data to determine creditable service and retirement coverage; and search for, interpret, and apply case law and Federal regulations. They carry out their assigned duties independently, signing off on all retirement packages and benefit forms for submission to OPM, and their final work products are generally not reviewed.

The appellants say, and their supervisor agrees, they spend approximately seventy percent of their time handling difficult employee benefits and retirement matters, stating that less than five per cent of their time is spent performing routine, straightforward calculations. The supervisor emphasizes the uniqueness of this situation within VA where HR Assistants provide extensive employee benefits assistance without any guidance from higher-graded HR Specialists. The in-depth retirement assistance portion of this work takes about forty per cent of their time and includes explaining eligibility requirements, vetting the employee's correct service computation date (SCD), calculating complex annuity estimates, and processing final retirement packages.

Prior to performing a retirement calculation, the appellants must verify that the employee's Master Record is correct. This is accomplished by closely examining the employee's official personnel folder (OPF) to ensure the SCD has been accurately calculated; to verify retirement eligibility complicated by such issues as potential title 5 and title 38 dual appointments or coverage under FICA; and to identify any periods of part-time or intermittent service.

The remaining thirty percent of the appellants' work consists of providing support to the automated information systems management functions. The appellants are responsible for establishing, consolidating, and maintaining employee OPFs using OPM's *Guide to Processing Personnel Actions (Operating Manual)*. They process personnel actions utilizing the agency's proprietary and human resources information system (HRIS), reviewing personnel actions for accuracy and completeness before completing data entry. They also edit error listings from the HRIS and make corrections.

Based on our review, we find the official PD contains the major duties and responsibilities assigned to and performed by the appellants, and we incorporate it by reference into our decision.

Title, series, and standard determination

The agency has placed the appellants' position in the GS-203 series, and titled it, Human Resources (HR) Assistant, with the parenthetical titles, Information Systems (abbreviated to Info Sys) and Office Automation (abbreviated to OA). The appellants agree with the series and standard determinations, but disagree with the parenthetical designations. The grading criteria for positions in the GS-203 series, as described in the Job Family Standard (JFS) for Assistance Work in the Human Resources Management Group, GS-0200, are directly applicable to the appellants' position and will be used for grade-level determination.

Section III H. of the *Introduction to the Position Classification Standards*, cautions that parenthetical titles should be used only where it would be helpful or necessary to identify further the duties and responsibilities involved which most closely reflects the paramount knowledge required to do the work. In all cases where a parenthetical title is used, the position description must reflect the duties that support the parenthetical designation. The record shows that the appellants' primary work is to provide guidance to employees concerning their employee benefits and retirement coverage. Therefore, we find that the appellants' work is appropriately covered by the parenthetical designator (Employee Benefits) because they consistently spend seventy percent of their time providing guidance to employees, former employees, annuitants, survivors, and eligible family members regarding retirement, insurance, and health benefits. They also perform important information systems work, so the position should retain the parenthetical designation (Information Systems) because the appellants spend approximately thirty per cent of their time processing and inputting personnel information into the HRIS database. While the PD also specifies the need for competitive keyboard skills under the OA parenthetical, the record shows that these skills are not required to perform the appellants' regular and recurring work. Unlike the typing of letters and reports, entering processing system data does not require or even permit the performance of the level of keyboard skills as required for titling purposes by the OA Clerical and Assistance Series, GS-326. While the duties of this position do include office automation systems skills, they do not require a level of proficiency for competitive keyboard skills as defined in the GS-326 PCS. Since these skills are included in the Information Systems specialty, we have determined that the OA parenthetical is unnecessary. Therefore, the appropriate title and series of this position should be HR Assistant (Employee Benefits/Information Systems or appropriate abbreviations), GS-203.

Grade determination

The appellants agree with the agency's crediting of Factors 2-3, 3-3, 6/7-2B, 8-1, and 9-1 but disagree with the agency's evaluation of Factors 1-4, 4-2, and 5-2. Based on a careful review of the record, we agree that the position is properly evaluated at Levels 2-3, 3-3, 6/7-2 B, 8-1, and 9-1. We will focus our analysis on Factors 1, 4, and 5.

The JFS for Assistance Work in the Human Resources Management Group, GS-0200, which covers the GS-203 series, is written in the Factor Evaluation System (FES) format. Under FES, each factor level description in a standard describes the minimum characteristics needed to receive credit for the described level. Therefore, if a position fails to meet the criteria in a factor level description in any significant aspect, it must be credited at a lower level. Conversely, the position may exceed those criteria in some aspects and still not be credited at a higher level. The total points assigned are converted to a grade by use of the grade conversion table in the standard. Our evaluation with respect to the FES factors follows.

Factor 1, Knowledge required by the position

This factor measures the nature and extent of information an employee must understand in order to do the work and the skills needed to apply that knowledge.

At Level 1-4, the work requires a knowledge of, and skill in applying, an extensive body of HR rules, procedures, and operations sufficient to perform a wide variety of interrelated and/or non-standard HR support work; plan, coordinate, develop facts and/or resolve support problems in one or more HR specialties; use personal computers with office applications to perform operations or to prepare complex documents containing tables or graphs; and to refer to online HR Web sites to obtain required information accessible over the Internet. Examples of work at this level include obtaining relevant facts about the problem; evaluating the adequacy of these facts in light of established precedents; and explaining options available to the employee based upon analysis of individual circumstances.

Illustrative of work at the 1-4 Level, the appellants are required to demonstrate a working knowledge and clear understanding of the governing rules and regulations by informing and assisting employees, their spouses, and families about eligibility requirements for qualifying for retirement and explaining the different types of retirement, including voluntary, disability, early out, buy-out, and related survivor benefits of the different retirement systems. Their work involves preparing complicated retirement estimates and creditable service computations. They process retirement applications, compute and explain complex annuity estimates, and discuss health and life insurance options, Social Security windfall elimination, and CSRS pension offset, if applicable.

At Level 1-5, the highest level described in the GS-200 JFS , the work requires knowledge of, and skill in applying, a comprehensive body of HR rules, procedures, and technical methods sufficient to make presentations following established lesson plans for routine administrative support subjects; conduct interviews to identify and organize pertinent facts of a situation; provide advice to employees regarding minor problems of employee conduct, dissatisfaction, or poor work habits; explain to supervisors the nature of records or sequence of actions required in connection with recurring disciplinary problems, such as excessive unplanned absences; assist supervisors in writing admonishment letters; and, explain options to employees when they are dissatisfied with their performance ratings.

Characteristic of employee benefits work at Level 1-5, the employee must have knowledge of, and skill in applying, a comprehensive body of HR rules, procedures, and technical methods concerning employee benefits sufficient to provide advice and assistance to employees regarding employee benefit problems and issues; and research, identify, and explain complicated and in-depth employee benefit-related issues, such as health benefits conversion and complicated annuity calculations and information. Employees are required to demonstrate a working knowledge and clear understanding of the rules and regulations governing employee benefits. Work is comparable to other specialized HR assistant functions, e.g., assisting HR Specialists or an HR Officer by classifying a variety of lower grade-level positions by reviewing the position description and organization structure, and obtaining required information from the supervisor; OR conducting recruitment/examining activities for common lower-grade positions; making appropriate modifications to standard or precedent announcement(s); reviewing applications to assess applicants' basic qualifications; preparing the appropriate certificate; taking appropriate action upon selection; and advising the selecting official on hiring procedures and requirements.

The appellants work fully meets and, in some aspects, exceeds Level 1-4. While the appellants perform some of the work illustrated at Level 1-5, e.g., they explain complicated and in-depth employee benefit-related issues, such as health benefits conversion and complex annuity calculations; the work does not require the degree of research, judgment, and analytical skills as indicated at this level. For example, the appellants cited a case where a retiree was covered by multiple systems including CSRS offset, FERS, and Social Security under FICA. The case was further complicated, because he had served under a dual appointment and had performed part-time work. This required gathering and interpreting all relevant information, analyzing the consequences of various laws and regulations, and making a decision on how it affected the individual's retirement annuity. These types of decisions are based on difficult, but clearly defined guidelines, and unlike Level 1-5, the type of analysis and research required are limited because most determinations concerning the different retirement systems are covered by OPM's Retirement Information System Manual. In administering the local Federal employee benefits program at the installation level, they apply an extensive, yet fundamental, set of HRM laws, principles, systems, policies, methods, and practices as they apply to the Federal employee benefits program. The appellants conduct interviews with retiree eligibles or beneficiaries, gather data to determine creditable service and retirement or benefit eligibility, and prepare retirement estimates. While the appellants do work in the absence of a higher-level HR Specialist, provide advice and information independently, and have signatory authority for the retirement packages prepared for submission to OPM's Center for Retirement and Insurance Services (RIS) Programs for crediting of pensions, their advice is provided within well-established guidelines, practices, and procedures. The work knowledge required to perform the work, while extensive, does not equate to the comprehensive type of program work intended at the Level 1-5. Therefore, because the position does not fully meet Level 1-5, this factor must be evaluated at Level 1-4 and assigned 550 points.

Factor 4, Complexity

This factor covers the nature, number, variety, and intricacy of tasks, steps, processes, or methods in the work performed; the difficulty in identifying what needs to be done; and the difficulty and originality involved in performing the work.

At Level 4-3, the highest level described for this factor in the GS-200 JFS, work consists of different and unrelated steps in accomplishing HR assignments and processes. The employee analyzes factual data, identifies the scope and nature of the problems or issues, and determines the appropriate action from among many alternatives. Employees at Level 4-3 identify and analyze HR issues and/or problems to determine their interrelationships, and the appropriate methods or techniques needed to resolve them.

Illustrative of work at Level 4-3 for assistants engaged in employee benefits work includes providing guidance and assistance to employees concerning intricate employee benefit provisions and explaining eligibility for various types of retirement programs including voluntary, disability, discontinued service, early-out, buy-outs, and other reduction-in-force provisions. The employees explain survivor benefits, computations, health and life insurance options, public pension offset, windfall elimination, Social Security, TSP, and other current and emerging provisions. They also assist employees who have encountered problems in applying for benefits. Employees at that level

determine interrelationships and select appropriate methods and techniques needed to resolve problems employees are having in understanding the benefits requirements and obtaining benefits. They must determine whether a new appointee has previous Federal service, whether the periods of prior service are creditable, whether the employee is eligible for Federal benefits, and has creditable service for benefit conversion. They also must reconcile master HR records against computer files and/or against records that the organization maintains. They determine interrelationships and appropriate methods and techniques needed to resolve difficult problems and identify issues of complex programmatic responsibilities of the next higher level, such as the facts regarding an employee's prior service, computation problems as a result of an employee's record containing many breaks in service, leave without pay, and questionable creditability or coverage, as well as appointment conversion processing complicated by previous work history, military service, and education.

Level 4-3 is met. Illustrative of this level, the appellants provide guidance to current and former employees, annuitants, survivors, and eligible family members regarding retirement, TSP, life insurance, and health benefits. The appellants determine creditable service for leave, retirement, and TSP purposes; determine if military service is creditable and for what purpose; and compute annuity estimates and complete all retirement application paperwork. Their work routinely involves preparing complicated retirement estimates and complex creditable service computations.

Many recurring SCD problems occur because of complicated issues stemming from confusion with title 5 and title 38 appointments. Such problems frequently result in employees improperly receiving credit for military service for leave and retirement purposes. Typical of cases handled by either of the appellants are those that involve retired military service which is only creditable for leave and retirement purposes if there has been a military service deposit (MSD), or if the employee intends to waive retired military pay. The appellants discover cases where employees are found to be in the wrong leave group accruing more leave than entitled, specifically because the SCD was inaccurate due to an error based on their military service record. This occurs when the employee is assigned to the wrong leave group because the retired military code was absent from the Master Record. This error can have a serious impact on employees' retirement plans because even though they may be making MSD, they are not aware that they would have to waive their military retired pay in order to receive credit for military time on civilian retirement. This type of case becomes even more difficult when a determination must be made as to whether the disability retirement was due to an instrumentality of war, or occurred in the line of duty during a period of war, as defined in sections 101 and 301 of title 38, USC. These complicated situations are typical of the complexity of work described at this level. Therefore, this factor is evaluated at Level 4-3 and 150 points are assigned.

Factor 5, Scope and effect

This factor covers the relationship between the nature of work; i.e., the purpose, breadth, and depth of the assignment, and the effect of the work products or services both within and outside the organization. The concept of scope alone does not provide sufficient information to properly understand and evaluate the impact of the position. The effect of the work completes the picture allowing consistent evaluations.

At Level 5-3, the highest level described for this factor in the GS-200 JFS, the work involves treating a variety of routine problems, questions, or situations using established procedures, such as explaining benefits options available to employees based upon analysis of individual cases; rating employees in specific lower-graded jobs for promotion based on their relative abilities; and counseling employees on a variety of minor disciplinary actions. The work has a direct effect on the quality and adequacy of employee records, program operations, and services provided through the HR office. Work also affects the social and economic well being of persons serviced through the HR office.

Illustrative of Level 5-3, work includes explaining benefit options available to employees based upon analysis of individual cases and processing claims that require identifying and substantiating relevant information. Work at Level 5-3 also affects the quality and adequacy of services the employee benefits program provides.

Level 5-3 is met. The appellants work to resolve employee benefits issues and problems commonly encountered in an installation-level operating environment. For example, employees' retirement plans have been adversely affected by errors found in the calculation of their SCD either due to an error based on their military service record, or improper credit given for nonqualifying appointments. Technical actions taken and problems resolved are accomplished according to established criteria, guidelines, and/or practices. The appellants' work includes administering and providing assistance services regarding TSP, FEGLI, FEHB, as well as several Federal retirement options, including the CSRS, FERS, and disability retirement. The appellants assist employees and beneficiaries on retirement and benefit matters, prepare retirement estimates and paperwork, review all benefit forms, determine creditable Federal service, review all incoming OPFs for accuracy, and assist on benefit open seasons. The appellants' work has a direct effect on the quality and adequacy of employee records, program operations, and services provided through the HR office that include a variety of employee benefit problems, questions, and situations such as ensuring accurate and timely retirement calculations, and providing accurate and timely advice. Therefore, this factor is evaluated at Level 5-3 and 150 points are credited.

Summary

In summary, we have credited the position as follows:

| <i>Factors</i> | <i>Level</i> | <i>Points</i> |
|---|----------------------|---------------|
| 1. Knowledge required by the position | 1-4 | 550 |
| 2. Supervisory controls | 2-3 | 275 |
| 3. Guidelines | 3-3 | 275 |
| 4. Complexity | 4-3 | 150 |
| 5. Scope and effect | 5-3 | 150 |
| 6. Personal contacts and 7. Purpose of contacts | 2B | 75 |
| 8. Physical demands | 8-1 | 5 |
| 9. Work environment | 9-1 | 5 |
| | <i>Total points:</i> | 1485 |

According to the grade conversion table in the GS-200 JGS covering the GS-203 series, a total of 1485 points falls within the GS-7 grade-level point range (1355-1600).

The highest level of substantive work (Employee Benefits) which represents more than 25 percent of the appellants' time is evaluated at the GS-7 grade level. Therefore, based on mixed-grade position classification criteria (*The Classifier's Handbook*, Chapter 5), the final grade of the position is GS-7.

Decision

The position is properly classified as HR Assistant (Employee Benefits/Information Systems), GS-203-7.