

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Office of Personnel Management

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OFFICE OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT

By Linda M. Springer

The Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) purpose is almost unique in the federal government—it exists to serve other agencies. Its roots date back to the 1883 Civil Service Act, which established that merit-based hiring for federal employees be administered by a Civil Service Commission. The Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 distributed the commission's expanded responsibilities to three new agencies: the Merit Systems Protection Board, the Federal Labor Relations Authority, and OPM, which became responsible for the government workforce's personnel management. With a portfolio that ranges from personnel policy design and management, to benefit programs and performance management guidelines, to leadership development and human capital strategic planning services, OPM supports the people who execute your agency's mission.

While its name might imply otherwise, OPM supports the worldwide federal workforce's personnel management. It is led by a Director and Deputy Director who are political appointees, however career officials who have years of experience assisting agencies with human capital challenges carry out most of the agency's work. In addition to its responsibilities for policies, programs, guidelines, and workforce flexibilities that span administrations, OPM advises and leads presidential initiatives to address emerging workforce needs and performance issues.

How OPM Interacts with Your Agency

OPM engages with agencies in multiple ways, driven in part by the nature of the service. Human capital strategy and workforce management issues have dedicated OPM personnel with specific experience with your agency, in addition to their professional expertise. Other OPM officials will handle issues, such as benefit administration, with multiple agency clients.

Your department or agency will likely have its own personnel function led by a Chief Human Capital Officer (CHCO). While some CHCOs are political appointees, many are career officials; if they are not, a career deputy CHCO typically will be in place to provide continuity and institutional knowledge from one administration to another. Through interacting with OPM, these leaders have a current understanding of personnel practices and tools to assist you and the agency in maintaining a high-performing workforce. CHCOs also meet as members of an interagency Chief Human Capital Officers Council, chaired by OPM, to engage in collaborative initiatives and insight sharing.

The President's Management Council (PMC) is another venue for interaction. The PMC consists of department Deputy Secretaries and other senior

administration officials, including the Director of OPM, who engage with their counterparts on management issues, including those related to the workforce.

Because the overwhelming majority of the federal workforce is based outside the National Capital Region (Washington, D.C.), some of your agency's staff likely will be included in that group. OPM's field offices around the country provide local personnel management services. Federal Executive Boards supplement the work of those offices. The 28 boards across the country are comprised of local agency representatives and provide an opportunity for interagency dialogue and coordination on key issues such as continuity of operations.

In all these relationships, your, or more typically your human capital leaders', participation will enable you to be informed and to advocate directly with OPM on behalf of your agency.

OPM Can Be a Resource for You

Your success as an agency leader is directly dependent upon having the personnel to perform successfully. Understanding human capital strengths and gaps is a critical dimension of your agency's strategic, operational, and budget planning. Building on strengths and addressing gaps will likely require using flexibilities and other capabilities to support workforce recruitment, retention, development, and reward.

OPM can assist you in this undertaking. It has proven diagnostic tools and planning methodologies that have been refined by years of working with departments and agencies like yours. These services incorporate leading human capital management practices with a particular understanding of the federal government environment's unique characteristics. Having an experienced resource to help you avoid missteps that can result from applying well-intentioned, but inappropriate, solutions to government workforce planning will prove invaluable in helping you lead your agency effectively. OPM is that resource.

Partnering with OPM to Make Change

If you invite OPM to partner with you to design a workforce management plan that is informed by the full range of options available, you can optimize the outcome and timeliness of having a team capable of accomplishing your agency's mission.

This can be particularly valuable when unforeseen events emerge that expand the agency's responsibilities beyond what you had anticipated. These demands will often be time sensitive and require people with special skills and experience. Identifying such individuals, both within and external to your agency, in rapid fashion can be facilitated by engaging OPM to put its resources to work for you.

One of your first priorities should be to reach out to the OPM Director and Deputy Director. Whether the objectives you are responsible for achieving are routine or critical, you will only be successful if your agency's workforce is ready to execute. Having an established relationship with your counterpart at OPM will provide you a direct advisor who understands the administration's initiatives and can provide guidance for managing the most critical resource in your strategy—the people whom you lead.

***The Honorable Linda Springer** is a former Director of the Office of Personnel Management. She also served as Controller and head of the Office of Federal Financial Management in the Office of Management and Budget.*