



Tips for Lawyers Applying to Federal Govt. Jobs: Anticipating Timeliness, Deciphering Postings, & Drafting KSA's — Katherine Neville



Katherine Neville founded Neville Career Consulting to help lawyers understand their options and make informed decisions that advance their interests, both in the short-term and further along their career paths. She works with clients both locally in her offices in downtown Washington, DC, and across the country by phone.



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In the current economy, lawyers are increasingly considering applying for jobs with the federal government. Indeed, this influx of federal applications seems to be well-timed, since a Friday, June 19, 2009, *Washington Post* editorial pointed out that the federal government needs 600,000 new employees over the course of the present Administration alone.

I. Prepare for a Long Wait and Don't Assume It Works Like Other Places

Unfortunately, the primary focus of the editorial was a recent memo from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), highlighting aspects of a hiring system that is unbelievably — particularly for those coming from the private sector— slow and bureaucratic. The memo referred to previous studies that documented a sometimes *year long hiring process that 45 percent of federal job applicants polled found difficult to navigate.*

However shocking these numbers may seem to the uniniti-

ated, it is not as if the Administration and Congress are unaware of the problem. A bill to revise the government's hiring process is pending in Congress, OMB mandated in the memo mentioned above that agencies make at least basic improvements within six months, and the new director of the Office of Personnel and Management (OPM), John Berry, appears to be highly thought of and has vowed to streamline his agency's procedures.

Nonetheless, today's job seekers face the status quo, and previous unsuccessful efforts to improve the federal hiring proc-

ess abound. Any one who decides to wait until the hiring process has improved may miss any chance to work for the current Administration all together. Currently, hiring procedures vary widely by agency. OPM sets a number of the personnel policies and coordinates the hiring process for a number of agencies, but other agencies conduct the process independently.

II. Figure Out Where You Want to Work and What Jobs Your Skills Match

A. Research Agencies and Offices

There are offices in the federal government of which many people remain unaware, one of which may have a job very well suited to you. It is in your interest to cast a broad net, especially since positions with lesser known agencies and offices will have fewer competing applicants.

The first task is to research which federal agencies, divi-

sions, and/or offices do the type of work for which you are well suited. You can start by consulting broader resources, such as an A-Z list of agencies and offices in the federal government, websites for the legislative branch, and the annual rankings of the Best Places to Work in Federal Government.

B. Search for specific openings

Though it is referred to as the clearinghouse for federal government positions and is the most common search vehicle for job seekers, not all jobs are posted on USAJobs.

- Agency websites, whether or not they post on USA Jobs
- Excepted list of agencies that are not required to post on USA Jobs includes DOJ and the SEC
- Alternative search engines specifically

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- related to federal postings
- Twitter (SEC recently added this feature and others are beginning to)
- Talk to people who do the type of work you want to do to ask about the office's upcoming needs

Positions are searchable by several criteria, including:

- Geographic location,
- Title (verify that you're searching for the technical title rather than the informal title);
- Occupational series, such as 900=Lawyer; 500=Accountant; 343=Management Analyst
- Agency or Office
- GS Level (Salary range; GS11=entry level attorney)

C. Network

Not just the hiring process, but management, policies, and work

environment vary widely by agency, division, and often by office. As in any job search, the only way to know what work is like in a particular agency or office is to speak with people who work in that environment. Reaching out before a specific job is posted gives them a chance to let you know what they foresee coming down the pike and to know about you in advance.

Your application is much more likely to be successful once you have networked to:

- gather information about what the work entails and what skills are needed,
- identify what experience an attractive candidate brings to the table so you can tailor your application accordingly,
- demonstrate your interest, e.g. professional association committee, undergraduate or law school coursework or projects, pro bono work, etc.
- get your name recognized so that can be pulled out of the pile of applications

III. Take Time to Read Postings and Strategically Draft KSA's

A. Read each posting carefully

Vacancy announcements may look the same but are not. Before investing time in compiling an application, examine the posting carefully to determine:

- Who can be considered: internal (already work for fed) or external candidates
- Open period: applicants cannot miss the closing date, no exceptions.
- The type of appointment being advertised: perm, temp, term, part-time
- The number of positions the agency is looking to fill with the vacancy announcement, which can represent one or multiple hires/openings

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• The GS level of the position being posted (can range) and its promotion potential

In addition to the Overview that is first displayed online, postings include four tabs: Duties, Qualifications, Evaluation, & How to Apply

It is critical to note that the position's key words and requirements can be found in any or all of #'s 1, 2, and 3 above.

As a result, it is important to review all three carefully and break the text down into outline format.

B. Be aware of how your application will be reviewed and how KSA's are used

It is critical to understand that you could be the best candidate in the world for a specific position, but if you don't get beyond the HR screening process, your application won't be seen by those making the hiring decision. This hurdle can be tricky as a recent Partnership for Public Service Survey of federal agency Chief Human Capital Officers reported that "only 29 percent of agency Chief Human Capital Officers, the government's top HR experts, believe to a great extent that HR staff members *have the competencies they need.*"

The hiring process typically includes five steps:

1. First Screen: Basically Qualified (determined by HR)
2. Second Screen/Score: Highly Qualified (given a score and ranked by panel of staff in program office or by HR)
3. Interview Best Qualified (as determined by second screen in #2)
4. Final Interviews (Selecting Official)
5. Reference Check (HR)

Applications for federal government jobs can include between

zero and seven essay questions that require responses of one page or more each. These questions are referred to as KSA's which stands for "Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities" (KSA's), which are formally defined as the rating and ranking criteria that determine top candidates who are referred for selection (already qualified).

Traditionally, applications for attorney positions have not required KSA's, so that only attorneys applying for positions that did not require a JD—e.g. policy analyst, compliance officer, program manager, etc.—had to complete them. Currently, however many attorney positions now require KSA responses in addition to a resume and writing sample as part of the application.

C. Tips to Draft Successful KSA's

Some examples of how KSA's are worded include: "Describe your..."

- knowledge of accounting principles and practices;
- skills in analyzing federal and state regulations related to the Clean Water Act and related federal statutes;
- ability to solve problems and to work well under pressure;
- ability to communicate, both verbally and in writing.

In answering each part of such questions, it is critical to comply with the bifurcated review process and to write simultaneously for review by two audiences—both lay and sophisticated. The goal is to satisfy any posted HR and key word requirements but

also to impress your potential colleagues and supervisor in the office where the position will be located. With the caveat that the hiring procedures and processes differ by agency and sometimes by office, a summary of tips for a successful application that includes KSA's follows.

Identify Key Words by outlining and analyzing the Duties, Qualifications and Evaluation sections of the posting. Phrase items on your resume and in your KSA's in a way that incorporates these key words. Do not be afraid to use the exact words from the announcement in preparation for a review by a software application or a person without background in the field.

Translate Your Skills and Experience so that they are relevant

to the position to which you are applying. Summarize your skills and experience in the appropriate context. Narrow your emphasis in the text of your resume and in your KSA's so that unrelated items do not distract from the relevance of your related experience.

Analogize if you have experience performing the required task in a different content area. Show how your skills can add value even if your experience analyzing regulations is related to a different area of law or in a different context, e.g. advocacy rather than enforcement.

Make Clear That You're Interested and rebut the presumption that you are pursuing government work because the legal market is down. Put yourself in the employer's shoes and make

the case that would convince you of both your interest and how your skills that add value.

Use Specific, Concrete Examples of results-based accomplishments; include skills and experience you gained outside of work, volunteer work, during school, professional associations, etc.

Think Of Your Resume As A Supporting Document, making sure to back up your claims and be clear what you're referring to in your resume text. Don't use examples in your KSA's that aren't supported by your resume. You don't want to explicitly refer the reviewer to your resume in your answer (e.g., "see bullets under Jones & Smith"), and don't repeat the language of your resume verbatim. Figure out a way to reword the items in prose format.

Stay Within the Word Or Character Limit in your response to each KSA. The challenge is that the application itself does not always make clear that a limit exists or what it is. Any words over the limit will not be submitted as part of your application, so it is important to determine any applicable limits in advance of drafting your responses. To do so, you can cut and paste filler text in the online application itself to determine what the exact limit is before you begin to write.

If no KSA's are required by a posting of interest, then be grateful and apply the tips re answering KSA's to your resume: make sure it responds to the posting, incorporates key words, and provides relevant, results-based examples of your work.

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