

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Profiles In Retirement: A Hiring Hand For the Feds

By Glenn Ruffenach

Wall Street Journal

March 31, 2007; Page R6

Profiles in Retirement, a new Encore feature, will take a look each issue at a handful of intriguing people and how they're starting over in later life.

A Hiring Hand For the Feds

Vicki Novak, retired less than two years, is on a mission: to help smooth the way for fellow retirees, among others, to find work with the federal government.

At the same time, she has found what many Americans appear to be searching for in later life: an important and challenging job that makes use of her talents and experience -- and one that gives her the freedom to, well, play.

"I'm lucky," the 55-year-old Virginia native says simply. "I'm in good health, I'm passionate about what I'm doing, and I'm having a heck of a good time."

Ms. Novak works with the Partnership for Public Service, a nonprofit group based in Washington that educates young and old alike about the value of public service and helps recruit workers for government jobs. After spending 35 years working for Uncle Sam, Ms. Novak is now trying to streamline the government's hiring process, convincing government managers of the benefits of hiring from new "talent sources" (including older adults) and, at the same time, making it easier for applicants to get their foot in the door.

"In the next five years, 600,000 people will be eligible to retire from the federal government," Ms. Novak says. This, from a full-time work force of about 1.6 million. Already, "people are scrambling around, looking for help," Ms. Novak adds. "I think I can make a difference."

Ms. Novak is the first to acknowledge that none of this -- her new job, her lobbying efforts, her commitment -- was planned. "Before I retired, I wanted to do volunteer work -- maybe the elderly, or hospice, or children," she says. "There was no strong focus. Rather, her retirement to date is a lesson in the importance of remaining open to new interests in later life.

Ms. Novak had what she calls a "light-bulb moment" in early 2006. Recently retired from a top position at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, she was invited to speak at Louisiana State University. Talking with students, Ms. Novak realized that most had little if any knowledge about government work. "They thought that all jobs were in Washington, that there were no exciting jobs in government. And they had no idea where to go to find out."

Hoping to change such misconceptions, Ms. Novak approached the Partnership for Public Service and offered her services. Today, she spends about three days a week working on two major programs -- Call to Serve and Fed Experience -- designed to help recruit young adults and baby boomers, respectively, for positions in the federal government.

Ms. Novak says it's the balance she has struck between doing "something that's meaningful" and still enjoying travel and hobbies (her golf scores are in the low 80s) that has made retirement rewarding. After all, "we're telling [government] agencies to be more flexible -- to allow people to work part time, or work from home," she says. "The government hasn't done that in the past. But people want that flexibility, and employers need to be willing to meet them halfway."