



Move Around

By Karen Rutzick
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Every agency in the federal government has its own personality and culture. That point was made quite clear when the nonprofit Partnership for Public Service and American University's Institute for the Study of Public Policy Implementation released their Best Places to Work rankings for government agencies this month.

If you haven't checked out the rankings yet, they're worth a look. The groups broke down employee satisfaction by agency size and demographic factors such as gender, age and ethnicity.

There are wild variations. Among small agencies, for example, the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service took the number one slot. The agency scored 85.6 out of 100 in employee satisfaction. The Federal Labor Relations Authority fell at the bottom of the small agency list, with a score of 18.1 -- an enormous gap.

If your agency is failing to meet your standards, maybe it's time to move to a different one. One of the perks of working in the federal government is that you can jump around from agency to agency and keep your retirement, health and life insurance and vacation days.

Not only that, but in some cases, you can transfer without competing for the job with applicants from the general public. Here are some things to consider in contemplating a transfer to a new agency, courtesy of the Office of Personnel Management.

You can move to positions at any pay level, so long as you meet the standards for the job. When you first enter the federal government, you usually have career-conditional status for three years. That means you must work continuously for three years before you are given special consideration in hiring and firing. But transfers between agencies don't hurt your three-year stretch.

If you're looking to switch agencies, you have to do your own job search. OPM points to USAJOBS.gov, but networking with colleagues at agencies you deal with is the best way to go.

Agencies sometimes post job announcements under the merit promotion program, in addition to standard listings. If you want to use the transfer to move up in pay, merit promotion is the way to go. On USAJOBS.gov, make sure you answer "yes" to the question "are you a current or former federal civilian employee?" when searching to find merit promotion openings.

You can't bounce around too quickly. OPM requires employees to stay in their job for at least three months before transferring. Probationary periods continue when people move, just like career-conditional status.

Finally, you can't transfer to a select number of jobs that are only available to veterans, unless you are one.

When OPM Director Linda Springer makes her pitch to college students to work in the government, she

emphasizes the flexibility and range of opportunities. She told Human Resources Executive Online last year:

"One big thing that we need to do is dispel the notion that if you come to work for the federal government, you're going to be doing the same thing for the rest of your life, behind the same desk, with the same people. Clearly that is not the case. You can do anything you want working for the United States government."

That goes for all of you already in government, too.