

Want a job in Washington? Better get to work

Competition is intense as millions seek to be hired by the government

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WASHINGTON — Hundreds of thousands of American job seekers are hoping the election of Barack Obama will truly be all about change — job change.

In an economy as perilous as any in decades, with unemployment rates at their highest point in years, Americans are looking to Washington as one of the few bright spots on the employment landscape. While many industries are making cutbacks, the federal government is expected to hire 100,000 employees to work in Washington and all over the world during the next year or so.

That's the good news. The bad news is millions of Americans are eyeing federal jobs every week. And, perhaps even worse, some experts believe the federal hiring system is flawed and needs an overhaul right at the time it is needed most.

While the experts admit the odds are stacked against most federal job seekers, there are ways to improve your chances even under the existing system. Among the key tips: Focus on jobs that suit your talents and experience, be persistent, get to know the application process and network, network, network.

Kathryn Troutman, president of The Resume Place and author of the forthcoming second edition of her book "Ten Steps to a Federal Job," said the top jobs, those that are political appointees of the administration, will be gone shortly after the inauguration if not sooner.

But, she added, other jobs will open up because of retirements and other voluntary separations and new jobs will be created by the new administration's initiatives and increased government spending through economic stimulus

packages.

"I do believe that in the next two months the number of job opportunities should really expand dramatically. So now is the time people should be studying the job announcements and getting ready for the positions that are going to start opening up. This is the best employer in the U.S. and probably the world," she said.

So what's so good about a federal job? Well, they're stable, they pay well and there are a whole lot of them.

There are nearly 2 million civilian federal government employees, and that doesn't count the Postal Service or foreign nationals employed abroad. The work force is 56 percent men, 44 percent women and 31 percent minority. The average salary: almost \$80,000.

But the competition is fierce. When Obama launched his change.gov website to recruit talent for the 7,000 or so political jobs he must fill, more than 330,000 people responded. And USAJobs.com, the federal government's online job clearing house, has seen a major spike in traffic with 2.8 million people visiting the site weekly.

Max Stier, head of the nonprofit Partnership for Public Service, which promotes federal employment, said the dawning of the Obama administration has brought a new interest in serving the federal government, a perfect time for the government to bring in all kinds of new top talent.

Instead, he said, the hiring system is inflexible, confusing, time-consuming and doesn't do a very good job of matching America's best and brightest with the jobs that will best suit them. Reforming the system, he said, should be a priority even before the administration starts filling jobs.

"If they hire poorly, it doesn't matter if they hire quickly," he said.

Still, Stier hopes the enthusiasm Obama generated during the campaign will translate into a willingness among the most talented Americans to devote themselves to federal government work.

"Barack Obama said he wanted to make government cool again and he's on his way to doing that. He was a very exciting candidate who touched a real chord with the American people," Stier said.

So what kind of people are best suited for government work? Today, Stier said, the feds need workers who are dedicated, enthusiastic and tough.

"Today, I believe the government really needs change agents, not simply high achievers, not simply someone who is extremely capable. The government needs someone who is extremely capable and is also persistent, someone who derives satisfaction out of the ability to work through hard challenges and grueling problems. It's not for the faint of heart," he said.

So how do you go about getting ready to seize one of these prime gigs? First stop is USAJobs.gov, where the federal government posts civilian job openings. There are openings for everything from astronomers to zoologists.

Spend plenty of time getting to know the sites, a daunting task in itself. Review job announcements and application forms, which are long and complicated, including essay questions that demand thorough responses.

Post your résumé on USAJobs.com, but remember to search job announcements for keywords that describe the kind of applicants the government is seeking. Include these keywords both in your résumé, which you should revise for each position, and the essay questions.

Stay focused on jobs you are well-suited for. If you're a recent grad with a degree in literature, that job as a foreign affairs analyst at the State Department is probably not for you.

And, perhaps most important, network. Reach to everyone you know for help, and encourage them to leverage their networks on your behalf.

According to a report issued last year by the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, USAJobs.gov was not the primary source of job information for most respondents to a survey it conducted.

"More new hires relied on their network of friends, their relatives, and their new federal supervisors and co-workers to learn about job opportunities. Word of mouth is effective not only for some applicants, but also for agencies trying to find high-quality applicants," the report said.

It's a lot of work, but persistence and patience are going to pay off. You have to make sure you have more than one iron in the fire at all times, Stier said.

"Working in the federal government is the most rewarding occupation people can have, but getting into it can be among the most challenging," he added.

How to get a federal job

Focus your job search: On any given day, there are more than 30,000 jobs posted on USAJobs.gov, the federal government's online employment clearing house. You can't apply for them all, so narrow the list down according to your interests and qualifications.

Network: It's impossible to overstate the importance of the human touch, even in these days of online job seeking. Start with an e-mail to friends and family. Then study up on people, missions and agencies in the federal government to find contacts.

Keywords: Much of the federal government's hiring is done through online applications, and to make the first cut you must include keywords in your applications. The good news is the keywords are right there in the job announcements. Look for keywords that describe the traits the government is looking for and spit the government's own words back at them.

Write a federal résumé: A federal résumé is way different than a private industry résumé. It's at least twice as long, full of detail about you and includes language geared toward each job description. And, yes, you should make use of keywords in your federal résumé as well as in the application itself.

Apply for jobs: There's no getting around it, applying for federal jobs is a lot of work. But once you have a good résumé and get familiar with the application landscape, it's easy to adapt your work on one application to others. And apply a lot, because it takes weeks, even months, for the federal government to hire, so you want a lot of irons in the fire.

Source: "Ten Steps to a Federal Job" by Kathryn Troutman, www.resume-place.com, [The Partnership for Public Service](http://ThePartnershipforPublicService.com)