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## The best & worst places to work in federal IT

**FCW's survey offers insights into what workers like ... and don't**

**By Judi Hasson**  
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NASA, the Commerce Department and the Transportation Department are the best agencies for federal information technology workers, according to a subscriber survey Federal Computer Week conducted. The departments of Housing and Urban Development, State and Education are the worst for IT workers.

Although it is impossible to peg a definitive "best" agency, FCW's survey, conducted last month, found that the 602 federal workers who responded like the freedom to innovate on the job and appreciate managers who understand IT.

Nearly 70 percent say they are happy in their jobs. Based on their responses, federal IT workers value the ability to affect an agency's mission using technology. They like working on a strong team and the feeling of achievement, and they are passionate about their work. They like having a nice cubicle or office to work in and an easy commute by car or public transportation. A nice cafeteria and good gym facilities aren't high on their list, however.

A couple of trends perceived to be controversial didn't resonate with our respondents. They don't consider telework a top priority. Workers satisfied in their jobs and those not as happy ranked telework last among the priorities for job satisfaction. Only six out of 175 people who aren't satisfied in their jobs said the inability to telecommute was the top reason for their dissatisfaction. Respondents didn't express concerns about proposed Bush administration plans to eliminate the 50-year-old General Schedule pay system, which would change the rules for paying and promoting federal employees.

The online survey included a section for comments from respondents. Most people — especially those in critical positions — asked not to be identified because they worried their comments could affect their careers. Some did not include contact information with their comments.

Unhappy federal IT workers said they don't like the constant threat of budget cuts and outsourcing. Some respondents said they were tired of reorganizations and reshuffling. Others said some agencies need major overhauls, however, to become better places to work. They cited bad management and antiquated IT equipment, among other reasons for their dissatisfaction.

"The biggest factor in making any job or place of employment good is the leadership and management style used by the supervisors and immediate managers," said Ray Rathburn, an IT specialist at the Social Security Administration in Seattle, who said he is happy with his job.

"The effective use of computer technology is playing a large part in improving the efficiency of SSA," he added. "It makes you feel good about yourself to

be involved in such a forward-looking and technologically advancing organization."

Respondents gave many reasons for job satisfaction: great co-workers, good training, interesting job assignments and loving the job despite having poor managers.

Those who were unhappy have their reasons, too, citing the organizational culture, the continued threat of outsourcing, infighting and IT departments in disarray.

"Clearly, management matters," said John Palguta, vice president of policy and research at the Partnership for Public Service, an independent think tank. "Every employee wants a good manager, and if you are an IT professional, you want a manager who understands the work you do."

One disgruntled IT worker at the Securities and Exchange Commission wrote in response to the survey that morale the office couldn't be worse.

"Management doesn't care about individuals unless they are attorneys," said the SEC worker, who was not identified. "We have an A team and B team. All monies and promotions go to the A team. The management here is so biased that it is pathetic."

The survey also found some agencies that simultaneously scored at the top for satisfaction and at the bottom for dissatisfaction. The Homeland Security Department, SSA and the Agriculture Department scored in the top and bottom for satisfaction. About two-thirds of respondents said they were happy in their jobs at those three departments. One-third voiced either a neutral attitude, low satisfaction or said they were very unsatisfied.

Other reasons for dissatisfaction include having unqualified managers or co-workers. Some respondents complained that agencies lacked standards for databases and information. "Everybody just goes off and does their own thing without regard for existing data sources or structures," said one respondent, who also did not want to be identified. One IT worker at SSA complained about a patchwork approach to IT.

"We have few professionals," the SSA worker said. "Most people learned on the job."

Peter Winch, a national organizer at the American Federation of Government Employees, which represents 600,000 government workers, said he is not surprised that DHS' Transportation Security Administration received negative reviews in the FCW survey.

TSA "needs to be reformed, not abolished," Winch said. "There's no outlet for people on the job at TSA. The turnover is much higher than any other federal agency. It is a very command-down-structured organization. It has the highest discrimination complaints, the highest injury rates on the job. A lot of people went to work for TSA who wanted to do something for their country, and they are not being appreciated for their dedication."

Problems also persist at HUD, according to the survey. One HUD IT executive said the department has been outsourcing too much work, which hinders the completion of many jobs, including simple tasks such as maintaining an adequate supply closet.

"There's a fair amount of outsourcing even things as minor as moving a machine or printer now," said the HUD employee, who did not want to be identified. "In the past, we had toner and cartridges stocked in the stockroom. Now, we have to make a call, get a ticket written up and get it delivered."

During a telephone interview, the HUD employee said department executives did not study the IT office before outsourcing work. The employee said they didn't conduct an analysis to determine workers' skill sets and the most appropriate work for outsourcing. Although HUD has emphasized hiring small and minority-owned businesses, large companies often finagle a subcontract, the HUD employee said.

Despite the gripes, many federal IT workers like their jobs, according to the FCW survey. The National Weather Service scored the highest satisfaction rate. People like to work for NWS, said William Murray, deputy chief of the agency's Systems Operating Division for the Eastern Region.

"Technology has afforded us the opportunity to significantly improve our warning and forecasting responsibilities, as well as outreach activities to our customers and the general public," Murray said. "The men and women of the National Weather Service are almost always in a 'firefighting mode' because the agency is [a round-the-clock] operation, and all rise to the occasion during every significant, severe weather event."

Tom Pyke, chief information officer at Commerce, which includes NWS, the Census Bureau, the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, and the National Institute of Standards and Technology, said the department's IT professionals are happy because their missions range "from forecasting weather to evaluating patent applications to counting people to performing world-class research."

"Our IT professionals understand and believe that what they do is important, that what they do individually really matters, that the missions they support matter to citizens, individual businesses and companies," Pyke said.

Most IT workers who said they wanted another job said they would rather be working at the Defense Department or NASA.

"NASA is a great place to work because of the excitement and questions you get from kids and the respect you get from adults when they ask, 'Where do you work?' and you reply 'NASA,'" said Noah Nason, chief of NASA's User Services Branch.

Despite some employees' desire to work at another agency, 74 percent said they would prefer to stay where they are. The remainder said they would like to work elsewhere within the government, and 71 also said they currently were extremely or very satisfied even though they were looking to move.

Most respondents said they would change jobs because they strongly believed in the mission of another agency or office.

DHS ranked third on a list of agencies where employees would like to work if they changed federal jobs.

Kathleen Egbert, an IT manager at DHS, said she's willing to give the infant agency a chance because "it has good potential. The problem is there was not enough planning time before the consolidation."

"If I were to move, it'd either be for the commute or 'the job of a lifetime.' Otherwise, I'm set to ride out the changes and see where DHS will lead us," she added.

The Federal Aviation Administration got the highest marks of any DOT agency, and 78 percent of all DOT responses came from FAA workers. "What greater mission to have than transporting people safely through the sky," said Daniel Meehan, the FAA's CIO.

During the past three years, Meehan said, the FAA has held IT conferences that attracted more than 500 workers nationwide to discuss major issues and make sure everyone is working toward the same goals. "I think that's permitted us to form a community spirit to look at the future, get our work done for the year and train."

From a technology standpoint, the largest group of satisfied workers cite the opportunity to manage complex projects as the primary technology-related reason for their satisfaction. They also said they like the ability to build on their technology skills and use leading-edge technology.

"Nowadays, good technology is essential because if you cannot connect to the Internet through e-mail, you are not going to be in touch with your stakeholders," said Marilyn Short, whose job is IT capital planning for the Labor Department's Employment Training Administration.

According to survey responses, about a quarter of satisfied employees who want to change jobs would like to remain at the same agency. One hundred and thirty-eight respondents specified a different agency where they would rather work. Several indicated that they would be making a lifestyle choice. For example, they want to be closer to home, in a safer location or in an agency where they can advance to a higher pay grade. Only two mentioned moving to the private sector.

IT professionals who have held jobs for 20 years or more generally care deeply about what they do and are fairly satisfied at their agencies. People want to be valued and consulted, particularly in the planning phases of a budget or a project. They want to feel confident that their managers understand their concerns, the survey concludes.

To keep dedicated employees, agencies should clearly communicate their missions, ensure that all employees work toward them, develop a strong working relationship among top managers and employees, and explore flexible work arrangements, particularly for employees who already excel.

The survey also found that managers should seek opportunities for employees to lead complex projects and promote training and growth opportunities to keep employees happy and make them feel valued.

Technology is an important component of any good job, said Pauledta Thomas, a project manager at the Central Alabama Veterans Health Care System, which is part of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

"But for me a good place to work means there's a variety of tasks that you are assigned, and there's never a dull moment," Thomas said. "A variety of assignments is more important, and the idea that you are really making a difference, than the workplace where you are working."

*Lunn is research director for FCW Media Group, which owns Federal Computer Week.*