

GAO

Briefing Report to the Chairman,
Committee on Post Office and Civil
Service, House of Representatives

April 1989

SENIOR EXECUTIVE SERVICE

Data on Hard-To-Fill Vacancies Not Readily Available





United States
General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

General Government Division

B-226026

April 26, 1989

The Honorable William D. Ford
Chairman, Post Office and
Civil Service Committee
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Chairman:

This responds to the Committee's April 7, 1989, request that we provide information on Senior Executive Service (SES) positions vacant 120 days or more and the reasons why agencies were unable to fill their SES vacancies sooner. The Committee wanted the information as further explanation of the concerns expressed by the Volcker Commission and others about the difficulties agencies were having in recruiting persons for career SES positions.¹

We found that complete, accurate, and current data on career SES vacancies governmentwide were not readily available. Using information obtained from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), we identified 13 agencies that reported 10 or more vacancies as of January 31, 1989, that were at least 120 days old. We obtained the reasons why the vacancies were not filled; however, this information probably does not fully reflect agencies' recruitment problems. It appears to understate the degree of difficulty some agencies face in filling career SES vacancies, particularly those involving a high level of specialized technical or scientific expertise.

The audit steps we followed, our findings, and the reasons why additional data and analyses will be necessary to meet your objectives are summarized below. As agreed, we plan to do additional audit work to develop more information on the difficulties agencies have experienced in filling career SES vacancies.

¹Paul A. Volcker, Chairman, National Commission on the Public Service, Leadership for America: Rebuilding the Public Service (Washington, D.C.: 1989).

OBJECTIVES, SCOPE,
AND METHODOLOGY

As requested by the Committee, our objectives were (1) to identify SES vacancies that had remained unfilled for 120 days or more and (2) to determine from the employing agencies why these positions had not been filled sooner. The Committee's objective in requesting these data was to shed additional light on findings reported by the Volcker Commission and others on the problems agencies were having recruiting career SES personnel.

On April 10, 1989, we met with an OPM official to discuss our informational needs. OPM responded with extensive SES vacancy data categorized by individual agency. The official said that OPM's data vary somewhat from the actual staffing situation in some agencies because some were more prompt than others in reporting their SES vacancies and selections and in canceling the vacant positions they no longer intended to fill. He also said OPM could not tell from the staffing information reported to it why some agencies' SES vacancies may have taken extended periods of time to fill.

At the time of our meeting, OPM's data base contained information as of January 31, 1989; we thus selected that date as the cutoff for purposes of establishing the 120-day recruitment period. In computing recruitment time frames for specific vacancies, we used the date OPM's data showed the position was vacated as the "beginning date" of the 120-day period and the date the agency told us it had tentatively identified a selectee for the vacancy as the "ending date."

We interviewed executive recruitment officials in each of the 13 federal agencies where OPM's data showed at least ten 120-day-old SES vacancies on January 31 to verify these data and to determine the reasons why the agency had not filled the vacancy within 120 days. The information we obtained from the agencies was generally limited to testimonial evidence and data agency officials provided. Time constraints did not permit our independent verification of the information through reviews of recruitment files and other records. We did our work in April 1989 and in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

RESULTS

From OPM's data and our interviews with agency officials, we identified 319 SES positions in 13 agencies that were vacant at

least 120 days on January 31, 1989. Of this total, we found that the agencies were actively recruiting for just 74 SES vacancies.² Table I.1 in appendix I shows the number of vacant SES positions reported by OPM, the additional vacant positions reported by the agencies we visited, and the number of positions for which active recruitment had been in progress for at least 120 days on January 31.

The remaining 245 SES positions reported by OPM and some of the agencies we visited as being vacant were not included because many had actually been filled (or a selectee identified) by January 31; others had been abolished, were slated for cancellation, or were not being actively recruited; and several more were being held for noncareer appointees.

Of the 74 SES vacancies meeting our criteria, we found that the delays in filling 63 of these were attributable to internal agency processing and selection activities, such as rating applications, interviewing applicants, or making selection decisions. In five instances, applicant security clearance or conflict-of-interest problems surfaced. In four instances, agencies delayed decisions to fill a vacancy pending a decision on a vacant position's duties or its organizational location. Finally, in two instances, agencies elected to readvertise vacancies when their first announcement generated too few qualified applicants. Table I.2 in appendix I shows the reasons for delays in filling vacant SES positions in each agency.

REASONS WHY AN ALTERNATIVE
APPROACH IS NEEDED

On several occasions, interviewees provided anecdotal information indicating that while agencies generally have relatively little difficulty filling senior administrative and managerial positions, they have a continuing problem filling SES vacancies where a high level of specialized technical or scientific expertise is necessary. The information they provided illustrates why our current audit methodology would

²We defined a position as being "actively recruited" where the agency told us it was actually engaged in the process of hiring for the position as of January 31, 1989. Once a tentative selection was made--even if the selectee had not yet entered on duty in the position--we considered the position "filled," since the agency would no longer be seeking candidates at that point.

not have identified the degree of difficulty agencies experienced in filling certain career SES positions. For example,

- A National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) official said his agency had made several unsuccessful attempts to recruit someone for a key scientific position. He added that five different individuals were approached about the position but turned it down because the salary was too low. The official said that the position will not again be actively recruited until the new NASA Administrator is in place.
- A Department of Navy official said some Navy managers perceive that although they are recruiting well-qualified scientific and technical personnel, they are not attracting the very top people.
- A Department of Health and Human Services official cited incidents demonstrating the difficulties the agency has experienced in filling senior scientific positions. This official said that recruitment activities were suspended for some hard-to-fill scientific positions after these efforts were unsuccessful in attracting candidates. He also said that other hard-to-fill scientific positions have been filled on an "acting" basis, or with selectees from within the agency, thereby depriving it of new scientific ideas that persons from the "outside" would have provided. He pointed out that the Director of the National Institutes of Health has said that over the last decade it has not been able to recruit a single senior research scientist from the private or academic sectors to engage in the independent conduct of a clinical or basic biomedical research program.

Because governmentwide data were not readily available and because the methodology we initially followed would not identify the types of problems cited by certain agency officials, we agreed to do additional work at selected agencies. This work should shed further light on the problems agencies are having with hard-to-fill career SES vacancies.

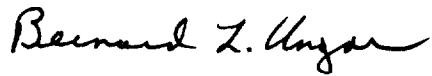
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Time constraints did not permit our getting agency comments on our findings; however, we did discuss SES vacancy data with executive recruitment officials at the agencies included in this report and incorporated their views where appropriate.

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We are sending copies of this report to the Director of OPM and to others who may have an interest in this subject. The major contributors to this report are listed in appendix II. Please call me at 275-5074 if you or members of your staff have any questions or require any additional information.

Sincerely yours,



Bernard L. Ungar
Director, Federal Human Resource
Management Issues

SES VACANCIES IN AGENCIES FROM
WHICH WE OBTAINED INFORMATION

Table I.1: SES Vacancies Reportedly Existing October 1, 1988 - January 31, 1989

<u>Agency</u>	<u>Reported by OPM</u>	<u>Additional vacancies reported by agency</u>	<u>Total under active recruitment</u>
Agriculture	25	0	1
Air Force	18	0	5
Army	59	0	21
Commerce	20	0	4
Energy	29	6	2
EPA	11	0	2
HHS	24	20	4
Interior	11	0	3
Justice ^a	26	0	5
NASA	10	0	0
Navy	24	0	11
OSD ^b	23	0	11
Treasury	<u>13</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>5</u>
Total	<u>293</u>	<u>26</u>	<u>74</u>

^aDoes not include FBI data.

^bOffice of the Secretary of Defense.

Table I.2: Reasons for Delays in Filling SFS Vacancies

Agency	Too few applicants, vacancy reannounced	Security clearance or conflict-of-interest problem	Agency undecided whether to fill position as currently described	Other internal agency processing and selection delay	Total
Agriculture	0	0	3	1	4
Air force	0	0	0	2	2
Army	0	0	0	21	21
Commerce	1	3	0	0	4
Energy	0	3	0	2	5
EPA	0	1	0	1	2
HHS	0	0	0	4	4
Interior	0	1	0	1	2
Justice	0	0	0	5	5
NASA	0	0	0	0	0
Navy	1	0	1	9	11
OSD	0	0	0	11	11
Treasury	0	0	0	5	5
Total	2	3	4	63	74

*Does not include FBI data.

Office of the Secretary of Defense.

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