

# Federal Hiring Process 2.0

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The current federal hiring process, while it consists of many methods of hiring, is not being exercised to its full potential. This research serves to provide an overview of current hiring authorities of relevance to bringing technologists into government and propose a new solution to increase the quality of hires.

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## Current Federal Hiring Process

There are several hiring authorities within the federal government, some of which include competitive service, senior executive services, excepted service, and direct hire. Each authority, however, serves a distinct purpose and encourages the hiring of people from different backgrounds to fill specific roles. Each agency has developed a process that facilitates hiring through one or more of these authorities.

## Competitive Service

Competitive service accounts for most civil service positions in the executive branch.<sup>1</sup> These roles require a competitive hiring process that typically includes a written test, resume evaluation, and qualifications evaluation. Throughout this hiring process, all candidates are subject to civil service laws to ensure equal treatment, and once hired they will receive a salary in alignment with the General Schedule pay structure that ranges from grades, also known as GS-level, one through 15.<sup>2</sup>

## Senior Executive Service

The Senior Executive Services (SES) is a corps of 7,000 high-level government administrators selected for their leadership qualifications. These executives offer a wide range of perspectives to public service and strive to promote a “citizen centered, result oriented Federal Government,” by serving as the link between political appointees and career civil servants.<sup>3</sup> While the corps consists of mostly career appointees hired through a competitive hiring process, some are limited term or limited emergency appointees to fill short term needs. There are regulations that limit the number of career and non career appointees within each agency. SES employees are paid within a specific range based on performance rather than the General Schedule pay structure.

## Excepted Service

Like competitive service, excepted service follows the GS pay structure. However, excepted service positions refer to roles that are not covered by competitive service or senior executive services.<sup>4</sup> Within

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<sup>1</sup> “Categories of Federal Civil Service Employment: A Snapshot.” Congressional Research Services, 26 Mar. 2019. [bit.ly/3dv9kaA](https://bit.ly/3dv9kaA).

<sup>2</sup> “Entering Federal Services.” USAJobs.gov, [bit.ly/3k0R37r](https://bit.ly/3k0R37r).

<sup>3</sup> “Entering Federal Services.” USAJobs.gov, [bit.ly/3k0R37r](https://bit.ly/3k0R37r).

<sup>4</sup> “Categories of Federal Civil Service Employment: A Snapshot.” Congressional Research Services, 26 Mar. 2019. [bit.ly/3dv9kaA](https://bit.ly/3dv9kaA)

excepted service roles, employers can set their own qualifications and are not subject to competitive hiring. Instead, these employees are appointed under authorities defined by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), and while these roles are not subject to appointment, pay, and classification rules in Title 5, they are subject to veterans' preference. Within excepted service, there are four subcategories: Schedule A, B, C, and D.

### Schedule A

Schedule A is designed for cases where it is “impracticable to examine” an employees qualifications.<sup>5</sup> This authority is an exception to the competitive hiring practice and is most commonly cited for hiring individuals with disabilities. However, there is another clause, (r), within Schedule A that is beneficial in providing industry/government exchange of talent.

### Schedule A(r) and United States Digital Service

Schedule A(r) is a “hiring authority for term appointments for a period between one and four years.”<sup>6</sup> United States Digital Service (USDS), which uses this authority to hire specialists for civic tours of duty, typically lasting between six months and two years, works to develop “responsive groups of designers, engineers, product managers, and bureaucracy specialists to work with and empower civil servants.”<sup>7</sup> <sup>8</sup> By using Schedule A(r), USDS is not required to post roles on USAJobs.gov. Instead, USDS simplifies the applicant experience by collecting applications through the USDS website and enhances the quality of hires by using subject matter experts (SMEs) to evaluate specialized skills. The focus on targeted recruitment and the applicant experience also emphasizes timeliness with an average of only 34 days between applications and conditional offers and a shortened security personnel process from 67 days to 20 days.<sup>9</sup> Through Schedule A(r), USDS has hired a total of over 400 digital services experts and continues to work towards introducing top technical talent throughout the federal government.<sup>10</sup>

### Schedule B

Schedule B is implemented in cases where it is “not practicable to hold a *competitive* examination.”<sup>11</sup> This authority is generally applicable for agencies that offer Special Executive Development programs and could be used to recruit senior-level technologists.

### Schedule C

Schedule C is used for political appointments that require confidentiality or are in policy-setting roles that are generally subject to change during presidential transition.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> “Excepted Service Hiring Authorities: Their Use and Effectiveness in the Executive Branch.” p.1, United States Office of Personnel Management, July 2018. [bit.ly/2Hbiqgu](https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/excepted-service-hiring-authorities/).

<sup>6</sup> “Hiring Authorities.” *TTS Handbook*, [bit.ly/2Tojlx](https://www.tts.gov/hiring-authorities/).

<sup>7</sup> “How We Work.” *United States Digital Service*, 15 Oct. 2020, [bit.ly/2Fzfzgt](https://www.usds.gov/how-we-work/).

<sup>8</sup> “Our Mission.” *United States Digital Service*, 15 Oct. 2020, [bit.ly/2FAF1ml](https://www.usds.gov/our-mission/).

<sup>9</sup> “2016 Report to Congress: Hiring Top Technical Talent from the Private Sector.” *United States Digital Service*, 2016, [bit.ly/31vDIwT](https://www.usds.gov/2016-report-to-congress-hiring-top-technical-talent-from-the-private-sector/).

<sup>10</sup> “Impact Report Spring 2020.” United States Digital Service, 2020. [bit.ly/31b0Y2H](https://www.usds.gov/impact-report-spring-2020/).

<sup>11</sup> “Excepted Service Hiring Authorities: Their Use and Effectiveness in the Executive Branch.” p.1, United States Office of Personnel Management, July 2018. [bit.ly/2Hbiqgu](https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/excepted-service-hiring-authorities/).

<sup>12</sup> Id, p.5.

## Schedule D

Schedule D applies in cases where competitive procedures make it impractical to recruit students and recent graduates.<sup>13</sup> This authority was designed to increase the number of students and recent graduates pursuing careers in the federal government. Pathways programs can be used to recruit students and recent graduates who are pursuing technology related coursework or career paths.

## Schedule E

Schedule E is used to appoint administrative law judges.<sup>14</sup>

## Schedule F

Schedule F is similar to Schedule C because it applies to political appointments that require confidentiality or are in policy-setting roles. However, Schedule F is used for positions that are not normally subject to change under presidential transition.<sup>15</sup>

\*Schedule F was amended by an [Executive Order](#) on October 21, 2020.

## Direct Hire

Direct hire is “an appointing (hiring) authority that the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) can give to Federal agencies for filling vacancies when a critical hiring need or severe shortage of candidates exists.”<sup>16</sup> While direct hire is only applicable for competitive service positions, this authority expedites the hiring process for applicants that meet all qualifications by circumventing competitive hiring and eliminating veterans’ preference. However, all roles must be posted on USAJobs.gov and all agencies should include information about direct hire in their vacancy announcements. Direct hire is applicable for executive agencies defined by OPM. These agencies can apply for a direct hire authority via written request to OPM, or if OPM independently deems the authority necessary to fill critical vacancies and vacancies lacking a sufficient number of candidates. While direct hiring authorities can be used for temporary, limited, and term appointments, they will likely have an ending date and are not intended to be used indefinitely.

In 2019, OPM launched a new direct hire authority for all IT Specialist positions to support the need for technologists in government. In addition to this authority, there are currently several direct hire authorities related to STEM, IT, and cybersecurity roles including IT Management GS-9 and above; STEM positions GS-11 and above as economists, biological scientists, fishery biologists, general engineers, civil engineers, physical scientists, actuaries, mathematicians, statisticians, and acquisitions; and cyber positions GS-12 and above as computer engineers, computer scientists, electronics engineers, and IT cybersecurity specialists.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> “Fact Sheet: Flexible Hiring Authorities.” Federal Chief Information Officers Council, Apr. 2014. [bit.ly/31RLqsL](http://bit.ly/31RLqsL).

<sup>14</sup> “Executive Order on Creating Schedule F In The Excepted Service.” *The White House*, The United States Government, 21 Oct. 2020, [bit.ly/ScheduleF-ExecutiveOrder](http://bit.ly/ScheduleF-ExecutiveOrder).

<sup>15</sup> Id.

<sup>16</sup> “Hiring Information Fact Sheet.” *U.S. Office of Personnel Management*, [bit.ly/2T3b29Q](http://bit.ly/2T3b29Q).

<sup>17</sup> “Hiring Information Governmentwide Authority.” *U.S. Office of Personnel Management*, [bit.ly/3553ZTp](http://bit.ly/3553ZTp).

## Subject Matter Expert Qualifications Assessments (SME-QA)

While the processes listed above provide a variety of options to facilitate hiring, several agencies struggle to increase effective hiring for technologists. In 2019, USDS and OPM piloted a Technical Subject Matter Expert Hurdled Assessment designed to “enhance the quality of hires.”<sup>18</sup> This program became what is now known as [SME-QA](#). The SME-QA process has been piloted in several agencies, demonstrating success, and when scaled across the government, SME-QA has the potential to revolutionize the federal hiring process by supporting the growing need for qualified technologists.

### Overview

SME-QA allows SMEs to partner with HR specialists to carry out a five step process designed to facilitate mass hiring for specialized roles. One of the greatest issues when hiring technical talent is that while HR specialists understand the nuances of hiring, they are not as familiar with the nuances in technical roles. Additionally, job descriptions lack the specificity required to attract specialized talent. These barriers make it difficult for HR specialists to identify the most qualified applicants. However, through SME-QA, SMEs are involved in the process of developing competencies, proficiency levels, and structured interview questions, as well as conducting resume review to identify qualified candidates. While veterans’ preference will be considered, it will only be applied to those candidates who receive passing scores on two rounds of assessments.

### Process

The SME-QA process consists of five phases:

#### Job Analysis Workshop

HR specialists and SMEs develop qualification assessments.

#### Job Announcement

Based on the qualification assessments, accurate and compelling job announcements are released. Currently, most agencies use OPM’s minimum qualification standard, but with SME-QA the qualification standards outline necessary technical competencies and describe these specialized experiences as minimum qualifications.

#### Resume Review

Two SMEs review each resume against core competencies and proficiencies. Currently, HR reviews resumes to identify applicants who are minimally qualified, but with SME-QA, SMEs review resumes for technical competencies.

#### Assessments

SMEs conduct up to two rounds of assessments to determine which applicants meet qualifications. Currently, candidates are only assessed through self-reported questionnaires, but with SME-QA, the assessments are conducted as interviews with SMEs.

#### Issuing a Certificate

After the assessments, candidates who achieve a passing score receive certificates and then veterans’ preference and category ratings are applied. Currently, the self-reported questionnaires assign applicants to quality categories based on their responses and apply veterans’ preference

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<sup>18</sup> *Subject Matter Expert Qualification Assessments*, [bit.ly/SMEQA](http://bit.ly/SMEQA).

from the start of the process. With SME-QA, HR ensures that the applicants meet GS level requirements, but veterans' preference is not applied until after the applicant receives passing scores from the assessments.

## Pilot Program Results

There have been seven SME-QA pilots across 15 agencies with USDS and OPM serving as project managers. So far this process has reviewed 1,843 applications, identified 179 qualified applicants, and selected 65 applicants. These pilot programs have been carried out in two rounds within agencies as well as a third pilot program to scale SME-QA across the federal government.

### Round 1

Round 1 consisted of implementing SME-QA to hire IT Specialists in the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Department of the Interior (DOI). Both programs successfully hired IT Specialists, and both agencies intend to use SME-QA for future hiring. One of the goals of the Round 1 pilot was to improve the applicant experience by reducing the amount of time between receiving applications and making selections. On average, hiring managers take 37 days to make a selection after receiving applications, but with SME-QA, hiring managers made their first selections between 11 and 16 days after receiving candidates.<sup>19</sup>

### Round 2

Round 2 launched pilot programs to hire product managers for the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), personnel security specialists for the Office of Mission Support at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), user experience designers for the Technology Transformation Services (TTS) at the General Services Administration (GSA), and grants management specialists for the Office of Mission Support at the State Department. After receiving feedback from Round 1, Round 2 refined the application process by replacing the first in person interviews with a written assessment or asynchronous interview. OPM also allowed agencies to limit the number of pages of work experience on a federal resume to ease the burden on SMEs working to review each applicant's qualifications. In addition to altering the application process, Round 2 established a Resume Review Tool to assist SMEs and the SME-QA conducted analysis on resume length and public vs. private sector applicants to draw the conclusion that while typical hiring practices favor a lengthy federal resume over a concise private sector resume, resume length did not significantly benefit or harm applicants throughout the SME-QA process.<sup>20</sup>

## Government Wide Customer Experience Strategist Hiring Action Pilot

The third pilot program was an effort to scale SME-QA across several agencies within the federal government. Nine agencies participated including Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB), Department of Education (ED), GSA, HHS, National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), Department of State, Department of Agriculture (USDA), US Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO), and Veterans Affairs (VA). Throughout this pilot, there were 884 applicants, 63 passed the assessments, 22 were selected, and 17 were hired, filling all available vacancies within six weeks of the job posting.<sup>21</sup> Almost all SMEs expressed interest in continuing

<sup>19</sup> "Round One Pilots." *Subject Matter Expert Qualification Assessments*, [bit.ly/SMEQA-ResultsRound1](https://bit.ly/SMEQA-ResultsRound1).

<sup>20</sup> "Round Two Pilots." *Subject Matter Expert Qualification Assessments*, [bit.ly/SMEQA-ResultsRound2](https://bit.ly/SMEQA-ResultsRound2).

<sup>21</sup> "Government-Wide Hiring." *Subject Matter Expert Qualification Assessments*, [bit.ly/SMEQA-Governmentwide](https://bit.ly/SMEQA-Governmentwide).

as a SME and recommended the process to other government employees. In addition to hiring customer experience strategists across these nine agencies, the program refined the Resume Review Tool and implemented HireVue and ScheduleOnce to hold the first interviews asynchronously and the second interviews via phone call with a SME. The pilot also resulted in these nine agencies sharing certificates across other agencies that were not part of the pilot provided that these other agencies confirmed that the competencies for their roles were the same. In addition to certificate sharing, USAJobs.gov could help to scale this process by notifying applicants that their certificates will be shared with other agencies for consideration in the same job series and pay grade.<sup>22</sup>

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While this paper outlines several hiring practices throughout the federal government and how they can be used to hire technologists in the immediate future, the overall priority for hiring departments within each agency should be to implement SME-QA. As proven by several pilot programs SME-QA effectively identifies top technical talent to ensure that the most qualified applicants receive certificates and are hired. Scaling SME-QA across all agencies will support the rise in technology and growing need for technical talent throughout the federal government.

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<sup>22</sup> “Government-Wide Hiring.” *Subject Matter Expert Qualification Assessments*, [bit.ly/SMEQA-Governmentwide](https://bit.ly/SMEQA-Governmentwide).