REAPING THE BENEFITS OF A GOVERNMENT JOB

Collectively, the US government is the largest single employer in America, filling approximately 1.6 million full-time, permanent positions; however, in reality, the US government consists of several hundred smaller employers, each of which has its own individual function and culture. As a result, the opportunities offered by government jobs are wide ranging, and the needs are diverse. **By Emma Hitt**

In times of economic hardship and downsizing, a science or engineering job with the US government is by comparison secure and accompanied by less pressure to obtain funding and grants than a job in academia. In addition, a lower risk of layoffs may exist there than in industry. Add to that the competitive benefits and salary, the learning opportunities, and the diverse working environments at various institutions, and a position with the US government can make an attractive proposition.

**Christa Speekmann** is an import/export specialist for farmed aquatic aquaculture at the US Department of Agriculture (USDA). Her job responsibilities include developing and implementing regulations for the importation of live animals into the United States. She also negotiates with foreign governments regarding health requirements for the export of live animals. “One benefit of working with USDA-APHIS [Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service] is using my science background to contribute to regulatory decisions, which are quickly implemented,” she says. “Other advantages of working for the government include having job security and good retirement benefits,” she says.

**Peter Gehring**, a physicist for the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), researches “smart” materials such as lead-oxide ferroelectric relaxors and highly magnetostrictive compounds. “I feel very fortunate to be able to enjoy enormous freedom to pursue the research projects in which I am interested while working at a place that is scientifically vibrant and offers substantial job security comparable to that of academia,” he says.

**Barbara Thompson**, an astrophysicist at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration’s (NASA) Goddard Space Flight Center, works on space missions observing the Sun. “We have many dedicated scientists and engineers who form an extremely cohesive team,” she says. “Most of us spend our entire careers here, so the commitment combined with the experience makes a very productive and exciting work environment,” she adds.

Where and What Jobs

Any job of interest to a Ph.D. scientist is likely to be available in the US government. Positions exist in more than 2,000 separate job categories. The 1.6 million federal employees are distributed among jobs in 15 cabinet-level agencies; 20 large, independent agencies (>1,000 employees); and 80 small agencies (<1,000 employees), according to a 2007 report compiled by the Partnership for Public Service. Contrary to popular belief, over 80 percent of government jobs are located outside of the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area, in locations across the United States (largest concentrations include Baltimore, Philadelphia, Atlanta, San Diego, and New York City) and worldwide. The health care occupations and sciences are projected to make up some of the fastest growing areas. **continued »**
It’s amazing the things that we have done that have an impact on people’s everyday lives.”  
— Sandy Miller Hays

Information Resources
The first step toward seeking a job with the US government is to search the federal jobs website www.usajobs.gov. This website includes a database of nearly all federal jobs, searchable by keyword, location, income level, and other parameters. At the time of this writing, the database included about 34,000 opportunities worldwide. A search with the word “scientist” pulls up over 700 jobs, and a search with the word “biology” pulls up over 100 listings (42 that pay over $100,000). In addition to the actual listings, the USAJobs website has a wealth of information about US government jobs, including a listing of the locations that are hiring the most people, the occupations most in demand, and the agencies with the most openings. Links to the webpages of the human resources departments for each of the individual agencies are also available.

Another website, www.bestplacetowork.org, describes the most highly rated places to work within the federal government, and represents a compilation of surveys from more than 200,000 federal employees. Currently, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission takes the top position based on several factors, including employee skills—mission match, effective leadership, training and development, family-friendly culture, pay and benefits, and work/life balance. The National Science Foundation is No. 5 out of 32 smaller agencies, and NASA is No. 3 and the Environmental Protection Agency is No. 6 out of 30 large agencies. The Department of Health and Human Services, which encompasses the National Institutes of Health (NIH), ranks 21st out of 30. The data available on this website can also be configured to help job seekers find the most appropriate agency based on select criteria.

The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) website (www.opm.gov) includes information on federal benefits and salaries as well as the demographics of the federal workforce. A subdomain of that website, FedScope (www.fedscope.opm.gov), also provides statistics such as demographic breakdowns by state, department, and/or type of position. Given that so much information is available, it is possible to thoroughly assess a position or institution before applying for a federal job.

Getting Specific
In addition to the USAJobs website, each of the individual agencies has specific websites and ways to navigate opportunities within an institution. “Right now we have about 110 postdoctoral fellowships being advertised at our training website (www.training.nih.gov),” says Roland Owens, chief recruiter for the NIH intramural program. “We usually also encourage people to make direct contact with a principal investigator if they are looking for a postdoctoral position,” he adds. Owens recommends that contact with a prospective principal investigator about a postdoctoral position should be made at least six months before the desired start date.

An effective way to find out information on postdoctoral positions at the NIH, Owens says, is to go to the annual report listings at intramural.nih.gov/search/index.htm. At that webpage, the annual reports can be searched by keyword. For example, typing in the key word “sarcoma” will pull up a listing of principal investigators at the NIH studying sarcoma—with a brief description of their research—who may have available appropriate postdoctoral opportunities.

Within the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), again, all the jobs can be found posted at the website USAJobs.gov, but Paul Sandifer, senior science adviser to the NOAA administrator, suggests that job seekers should contact the human resource offices at NOAA facilities in the area and talk to current employees, “particularly those working in doctoral positions in the agency. They should also consult academic mentors who are knowledgeable about the NOAA work force and areas for which we are seeking employees.”

“For people without much experience, taking on a fellowship is one of the best ways to get a foot in the door,” says Denise Koo, acting director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Office of Workforce and Career Development. “There’s an emerging infectious disease laboratory fellowship and an American Society for Microbiology laboratory fellowship, which generally last one to two years,” she adds. “A fellowship gives you the opportunity to get to know what the jobs are, and also obtain the public health experience that will help during the application process.”

Exacting Standards
Regardless of the implications of that old quip “close enough for government work,” the standards of science and work ethic compare well with those of academia and industry. The CDC’s Koo says that “in some ways, science at the CDC is perhaps more rigorous because it gets examined so much,” she says. “We’re government, and so we have a responsibility to be putting out recommendations and scientific data that are reliable—we have a whole peer-review process, and you’re not even allowed to publish anything until it goes through that process at the agency,” she says.  continued »

Featured Participants

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“Graduate students can conduct research in our labs as part of their Ph.D. training—this has been a very productive relationship.”
—Lawrence Reiter

Sandy Miller Hays, director of the Information Office with the USDA's Agricultural Research Service (ARS), notes that work at the ARS, carried out by 2,200 scientists, touches on the lives of everyone in the United States. “It’s a very exciting place to work—we have discovery going on all the time,” she says. “It’s not just about researching a new type of soy bean—we do a lot of human nutrition research, for instance, taking an agricultural commodity and turning it into a product that everybody can use,” she says. “It’s amazing the things that we have done that have an impact on people’s everyday lives.”

Opportunities
Because some hiring government institutions are so large—the intramural program at the NIH consists of about 1,100 research groups—opportunities abound for collaborations and interactions. “Our postdoctoral fellows, in particular, have an opportunity to meet a lot of people. Just about every Nobel Prize winner in Physiology or Medicine for the past 20 years has visited the NIH,” Owens says. “Most of the members of the National Academy of Sciences who are in the biomedical research area come to talk, and we make special opportunities for postdoctoral fellows to have lunch with the big-name speakers that come in.”

Owens also points out that about 20 people at the NIH, in the office of intramural training, are assigned to determine how to enhance the careers and skills of research fellows, with most of the institutes having their own training specialists. “We offer courses in how to write grants, how to get a job, how to get CVs up to speed, how to handle interviews, all sorts of things that smaller institutions might not be able to provide,” Owens says.

EPA's research facility at Research Triangle Park in North Carolina has been consistently ranked as one of the top places to work. The EPA forms several research collaborations with surrounding universities. “We have mechanisms whereby graduate students can conduct research in our labs as part of their Ph.D. training—this has been a very productive relationship that we have established with universities,” says Lawrence Reiter, the acting deputy assistant administrator for management. He notes that the EPA also has a federal postdoctoral program that allows recruitment for up to four years, and that these positions are posted on the USAJobs website.

At NOAA, one of the key benefits, says Sandifer, is the robust commitment to form partnerships with the external research community. “These partnerships go well beyond just providing competitive grants to academic researchers and include numerous cooperative institutes, joint programs with academia and nongovernmental organizations, involvement with students at all levels, and participation in international organizations,” he says.

Culture and Work/Life Balance
Every institution is different, but one of the benefits of a government job is that funding and resources are for the most part much more stable and forthcoming than in academia. Miller Hays says that scientists at ARS have guaranteed funding. “So you’re not scrambling for funds every year or every two years; there’s also a tremendous amount of autonomy on the part of the scientists; you don’t have to stop and teach classes—you’re just in there doing your thing,” she says. However, the 40-hour work week and plethora of paid federal holidays may be more myth than reality, at least at some institutions. At the NIH, Owens says that 60 hours a week is the minimum, “but many people will put in 60-hour weeks.” He admits that it can sometimes be a little hard for people who “want to have a life outside of science, but we’re trying to figure out how to balance the whole work/family issue,” he says. Nonetheless, at the NIH, a variety of extramural activities are available, including clubs for biking, judo, taekwondo, sailing, hiking, and yoga; there is even an NIH orchestra, says Phil Lenowitz, deputy director of NIH's Office of Human Resources. “So, we cover a broad spectrum—there’s pretty much something for everybody here.”

Whatever the background, and whatever the interest, the federal government is hiring and likely has a suitable job for a qualified person.

Emma Hitt is a freelance medical and science writer residing in Marietta, Georgia.
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