

Federal Hiring Process for Positions in the Competitive Civil Service: Overview and Recent Reforms

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Taylor N. Riccard

Analyst in Government
Organization and
Management

Barbara L. Schwemle

Analyst in American
National Government

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Federal law categorizes federal civilian employees into three types of service: (1) the competitive service, (2) the excepted service, and (3) the Senior Executive Service. These different types of service may be distinguished by different selection, compensation, and other standards. The Civil Service Act of 1883, popularly known as the Pendleton Act, and the resulting federal personnel system created the competitive service. The competitive service hiring process evaluates an applicant's relative level of qualifications for a position through fair and open competition in order to fill a vacancy. This process departs from hiring practices from the era prior to the Pendleton Act in which federal employment was largely based on political affiliation or personal connections. Title 5 of the *United States Code* contains laws governing federal personnel and the civil service, including the federal government's general authority to employ personnel.

Competitive service positions now comprise the majority of the federal workforce's on-board employment. The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has established a process for hiring employees in the competitive service that includes several steps under three phases of activities: (1) *Analyze and Announce*, (2) *Evaluate and Assess*, and (3) *Select*. The hiring process for competitive service positions includes roles for both OPM and individual federal agencies. OPM sets standards, establishes processes, and provides tools that agencies use to hire personnel through the competitive process. Federal agencies are required to comply with government-wide hiring policies set by OPM, such as eligibility requirements and public vacancy announcement requirements, but they often also have discretion to implement their own hiring practices.

The second Trump Administration has made significant changes to the federal hiring process for competitive service positions via several executive orders. In addition, OPM issued a memorandum in titled "Merit Hiring Plan," which further outlines changes to the federal hiring process that implement the requirements of the Trump Administration's executive orders on May 29, 2025. These changes include reforming the recruitment process, implementing skills-based hiring, revising the application process, and reducing time to hire.

This report outlines each step of the hiring process for competitive service positions, describes the changes made by the Merit Hiring Plan that alter the competitive hiring process, and discusses potential issues for congressional consideration. These issues include the Trump Administration's hiring freeze; developments related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility in the federal workforce; and skills-based assessments in the federal hiring process for competitive service positions. Note that the report focuses only on the competitive hiring process and does not discuss direct hire authorities or other specialized hiring paths.

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Introduction

Federal law categorizes federal civilian employees into three types of service: (1) the competitive service, (2) the excepted service, and (3) the Senior Executive Service. These different types of service may be distinguished by different selection, compensation, and other standards.¹ Congress has demonstrated a sustained interest in the federal hiring process for competitive service positions, which comprise the majority of the federal workforce's on-board employment.² As of September 2024, there were approximately 1.2 million individuals in these positions employed by the federal government in both full-time and part-time status.³ This number was an increase from September 2023, when the number of on-board permanent career competitive service employees was approximately 1.194 million.⁴

For competitive service positions, "individuals must go through a competitive process (i.e., competitive examining) which is open to all applicants" and may consist of a written test, an evaluation of the individual's education and experience, and/or an evaluation of other attributes necessary for successful performance in the position to be filled.⁵ The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has established a process for hiring employees in the competitive service that includes several steps under three phases of activities: (1) *Analyze and Announce*, (2) *Evaluate and Assess*, and (3) *Select*.

The second Trump Administration has made significant changes to the federal hiring process for competitive service positions. On January 20, 2025, President Donald Trump issued Executive Order (E.O.) 14170, "Reforming the Federal Hiring Process and Restoring Merit to Government Service."⁶ This E.O. directed the Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy—in collaboration with the OPM director, the Office of Management and Budget director, and the administrator of the Department of Government Efficiency—to develop a *federal hiring plan* to send to agency heads across the federal government. On May 29, 2025, Vince Haley, Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy, and Charles Ezell, then-Acting Director of OPM, issued a memorandum titled "Merit Hiring Plan," which outlines changes to the federal hiring process that implement the requirements of E.O. 14170.⁷ These changes include reforming the recruitment process, implementing skills-based hiring, revising the application process, and reducing time to hire. On October 15, 2025, President Trump also issued E.O. 14356, "Ensuring Continued Accountability in Federal Hiring," outlining further instructions for implementing the Merit Hiring Plan and additional agency requirements.⁸

¹ See CRS Report R45635, *Categories of Federal Civil Service Employment: A Snapshot*, by Jon O. Shimabukuro and Jennifer A. Staman, for a discussion of the three types of service.

² Office of Personnel Management (OPM), FedScope database, employment cubes, <https://www.fedscope.opm.gov/>, accessed on May 6, 2025. On-board employment measures a federal employee headcount as a snapshot in time. It is the number of employees in pay status regardless of full-time or part-time status.

³ OPM, FedScope database, employment cubes.

⁴ OPM, FedScope database, employment cubes.

⁵ OPM, "Competitive Hiring," <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/hiring-information/competitive-hiring/>.

⁶ Executive Order 14170, "Reforming the Federal Hiring Process and Restoring Merit to Government Service," 90 *Federal Register* 8621, January 20, 2025, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/01/30/2025-02094/reforming-the-federal-hiring-process-and-restoring-merit-to-government-service>.

⁷ OPM, "Merit Hiring Plan," memorandum, May 29, 2025, <https://www.chcoc.gov/content/merit-hiring-plan>.

⁸ E.O. 14356, "Ensuring Continued Accountability in Federal Hiring," 90 *Federal Register* 58387, October 15, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/10/ensuring-continued-accountability-in-federal-hiring/>.

This report discusses the changes made by the Merit Hiring Plan that alter the competitive hiring process and potential related issues for congressional consideration. The report focuses only on the competitive hiring process and does not discuss direct hire authorities or other specialized hiring paths.

Background

The Civil Service Act of 1883, popularly known as the Pendleton Act, statutorily established some aspects of the present-day federal personnel system.⁹ According to OPM, prior to the Pendleton Act, “[f]ederal employment was largely based on political affiliation or personal connections, a system known as the ‘spoils system,’ rather than applicants’ knowledge, skills, and abilities.”¹⁰ The Pendleton Act and the resulting merit system created the competitive civil service, “which emphasized an applicant’s relative level of qualifications for the position being sought, after fair and open competition.”¹¹ The proportion of federal civilian positions filled through merit-based hiring has increased over time.¹²

The act also established the Civil Service Commission, which continued with largely the same mandate until 1978.¹³ The Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 established OPM and gave the agency a significant leadership role in federal personnel management.¹⁴ The agency’s statutory authority is codified in Chapter 11 of Title 5 of the *United States Code*.

Title 5 of the *United States Code*

Title 5 of the *United States Code* contains laws governing federal personnel and the civil service. This title contains the statutory authorization for OPM and the Merit Systems Protection Board. It also contains relevant definitions and various provisions governing merit system principles, employment and retention, employee performance, pay and allowances, attendance and leave, and labor management and employee relations, among other topics.

Section 3101 of Title 5 contains the federal government’s general authority to employ personnel. This provision states, “Each executive agency, military department, and the government of the District of Columbia may employ such a number of employees of the various classes recognized by chapter 51 of this title as Congress may appropriate for from year to year.”

The Competitive Civil Service Defined

Section 2102 of Title 5 of the *U.S. Code* defines the competitive service as consisting of

[a]ll civil service positions in the executive branch, except positions which are specifically excepted from the competitive service by or under statute; positions to which appointments

⁹ P.L. 16; Civil Service Act of 1883; January 16, 1883 (22 Stat. 403). This law is discussed for historical context in CRS Report RL30795, *General Management Laws: A Compendium*, by Clinton T. Brass et al. (available upon request to congressional clients), in the article titled “Title 5, Part III—Employees,” by Barbara Schwemle.

¹⁰ OPM, *Annual Performance Report: Fiscal Year 2023*, March 2024, p. 6, <https://www.opm.gov/about-us/2023-annual-performance-report/fy-2023-annual-performance-report.pdf>.

¹¹ OPM, *Annual Performance Report: Fiscal Year 2023*, p. 6.

¹² See Jennifer L. Selin and David E. Lewis, *Sourcebook of United States Executive Agencies*, 2nd ed., Administrative Conference of the United States, October 2018, p. 62, <https://www.acus.gov/research-projects/sourcebook-united-states-executive-agencies-second-edition>.

¹³ See CRS Report RL30795, *General Management Laws: A Compendium*, by Clinton T. Brass et al. (available upon request to congressional clients).

¹⁴ P.L. 95-454.

are made by nomination for confirmation by the Senate, unless the Senate otherwise directs; and positions in the Senior Executive Service;

Civil service positions not in the executive branch which are specifically included in the competitive service by statute; and

Positions in the government of the District of Columbia which are specifically included in the competitive service by statute.¹⁵

OPM regulations to implement the law, codified at Part 212 of Title 5 of the *Code of Federal Regulations*, further provide that the competitive service includes

[a]ll civilian positions in the executive branch of the Federal Government not specifically excepted from the civil service laws by or pursuant to statute, by the President, or by the Office of Personnel Management, and not in the [SES]; and

All positions in the legislative and judicial branches of the Federal Government and in the government of the District of Columbia specifically made subject to the civil service laws by statute.¹⁶

Section 3304 of Title 5 of the *U.S. Code* authorizes the President to “prescribe rules which shall provide, as nearly as conditions of good administration warrant” for

[o]pen, competitive examinations for testing applicants for appointment in the competitive service which are practical in character and as far as possible relate to matters that fairly test the relative capacity and fitness of the applicants for the appointment sought; [and]

Noncompetitive examinations when competent applicants do not compete after notice has been given of the existence of the vacancy.¹⁷

By implementing regulations, OPM has prescribed that “[e]xaminations for entrance into the competitive service shall be open [and] competitive,” except when the personnel agency authorizes “noncompetitive examinations when sufficient competent persons do not compete.”¹⁸ The regulations authorize OPM to establish standards “with respect to citizenship, age, education, training and experience, suitability, and physical and mental fitness, and for residence or other requirements which applicants must meet to be admitted to or rated in examinations.”¹⁹

Hiring Process for Competitive Service Positions

The competitive service hiring process includes three phases of activities: *Analyze and Announce*, *Evaluate and Assess*, and *Select*. **Figure 1** illustrates selected steps in the process. Agencies may have more, fewer, or a different order of steps depending on their internal hiring policies.²⁰

¹⁵ 5 U.S.C. §2102(a). The competitive service includes positions to which appointments are made by nomination for confirmation by the Senate when specifically included therein by statute (5 U.S.C. §2102(b)).

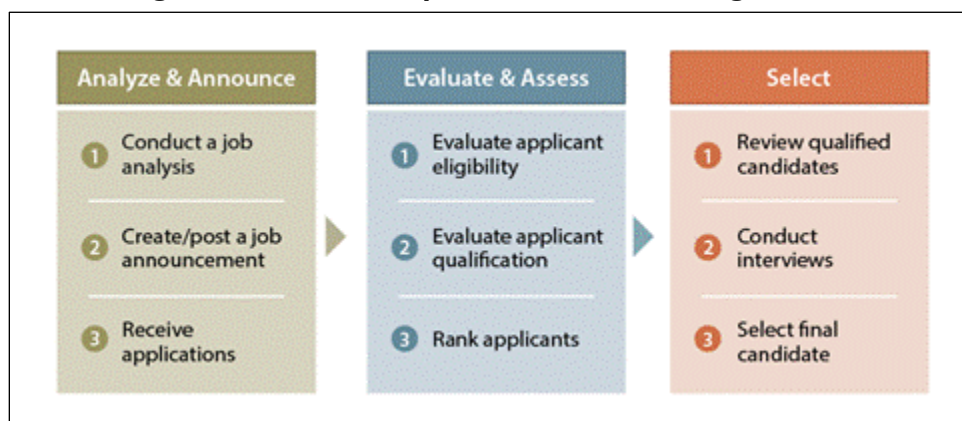
¹⁶ 5 C.F.R. §212.101(a). See also Civil Service Rule 1 at 5 C.F.R. Part 1 §1.2.

¹⁷ 5 U.S.C. §3304(a). Title 5, Section 2.1(a), of the *Code of Federal Regulations* provides that OPM is responsible for “[o]pen competitive examinations for admission to the competitive service which will fairly test the relative capacity and fitness of the persons examined for the position to be filled.”

¹⁸ 5 C.F.R. §332.101(a). See also 5 C.F.R. Part 332 generally.

¹⁹ 5 C.F.R. §2.1(a)(ii). See also 5 C.F.R. Part 2 generally.

²⁰ Some internal steps—such as applying veterans’ preference and developing certified lists of potential job candidates—are not discussed in detail. As such, the number and presentation of hiring steps may differ from those in OPM guidance. For more information on the federal hiring process, see OPM, *Delegated Examining Operations Handbook: A Guide for Federal Agency Examining Offices*, June 2019, <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/> (continued...)

Figure 1. Selected Steps in the Federal Hiring Process

Source: CRS analysis of Office of Personnel Management (OPM), *Delegated Examining Operations Handbook: A Guide for Federal Agency Examining Offices*, June 2019, https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/hiring-information/competitive-hiring/deo_handbook.pdf; OPM, “Hiring Process Analysis Tool,” <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/human-capital-management/hiring-reform/hiring-process-analysis-tool/>; and relevant sections in Title 5 of the *United States Code* and Chapter 5 of the *Code of Federal Regulations*.

Note: This is an illustrative example of the steps in the hiring process for competitive serviced positions based on OPM guidance. In practice, the number and presentation of hiring steps may differ from those in OPM guidance.

Roles of OPM and Federal Agencies

As the federal government’s central personnel agency, OPM has varied responsibilities related to an array of human capital management issues, including federal hiring for competitive service positions. OPM sets standards, establishes processes, and provides tools that agencies use to hire personnel through the competitive process.

Delegated Examining

Under Section 1104 of Title 5 of the *U.S. Code*, OPM has delegated to agency heads the authority delegated to OPM by the President to conduct competitive examinations for positions in the competitive service. Appointments made by agencies through delegated examining authority are subject to civil service laws and regulations. OPM’s *Delegated Examining Operations Handbook* instructs agencies on delegated examining. This document “provides agencies with guidance, options, and, where necessary, specific operational procedures that are designed to ensure that examining programs comply with merit system laws and regulations.”²¹

OPM’s *Delegated Examining Operations Handbook*, “Appendix D,” includes a guide for agencies on conducting a job analysis (see “Conduct or Confirm the Job Analysis for the Position”).²²

OPM manages USAJOBS.gov, the official federal government website for listing vacancy announcements for employment opportunities with agencies (see “Create and Post a Vacancy Announcement on USAJOBS.gov”).²³

²¹ OPM, *Delegated Examining Operations Handbook*, p. 5.
²² OPM, *Delegated Examining Operations Handbook*, p. 230.
²³ USAJOBS, “About USAJOBS,” <https://help.usajobs.gov/about>.

OPM establishes position classification standards and guides that provide general information to agencies used in determining occupational series, title, grade, and pay for competitive service positions.²⁴ OPM also sets the qualification standards for competitive service positions. These standards “describe the minimum qualification requirements (for example, educational, medical, age, experience, etc.) for each occupational series.”²⁵ These minimum qualification standards are posted on OPM’s website organized by occupational series.²⁶ In addition, OPM provides guidance, tools, and services to assist agencies with implementing effective assessment strategies to make selecting decisions (see “Evaluate and Assess Job Candidates”).²⁷

Federal agencies are required to comply with government-wide hiring policies set by OPM, such as eligibility requirements and public vacancy announcement requirements, but they often also have discretion to implement their own hiring practices. For example, many agencies administer their own internship programs for students and recent graduates. Agencies are often able to convert interns into permanent employees in competitive service positions.²⁸ In addition, federal agencies may choose to host hiring events, such as career fairs, both virtually and in person.²⁹

The Chance to Compete Act of 2024 (P.L. 118-188) authorized OPM and federal agencies to create *talent teams* to provide federal hiring support government-wide and within agencies themselves.³⁰ OPM’s Merit Hiring Plan issued in 2025 further leverages this concept by requiring OPM to establish a talent team to lead the government-wide implementation of the memorandum.³¹ OPM’s talent team is also tasked with coordinating the creation of agency talent teams. In addition, agencies are tasked with creating their own talent teams that “will be selected by each agency’s leadership and Chief Human Capital Officer (CHCO) from current staff” to drive implementation of OPM’s Merit Hiring Plan.³²

E.O. 14356 further requires each agency to establish a *strategic hiring committee* to “approve the creation or filling, as applicable, of each vacancy within their agency.”³³ The E.O. also directs agencies to prepare *annual staffing plans* that “utilize metrics, frameworks, and criteria for

²⁴ An *occupational group* is a major subdivision of the General Schedule consisting of associated or related occupations. An *occupational series* is a subdivision of an occupational group consisting of positions with a similar specialized line of work and qualification requirements. See OPM, *Handbook of Occupational Groups and Families*, December 2018, <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/classification-qualifications/classifying-general-schedule-positions/occupationalhandbook.pdf>; and OPM, *The Classifier’s Handbook*, August 1991, <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/classification-qualifications/classifying-general-schedule-positions/classifierhandbook.pdf>. For more information on the General Schedule pay system, see CRS Report R47033, *Federal Pay: General Schedule (GS) Pay Adjustment Process, Amounts Provided Since 2010, and Issues for Congress*, by Barbara L. Schwemle.

²⁵ OPM, “General Schedule Qualification Standards,” <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/classification-qualifications/general-schedule-qualification-standards/>.

²⁶ OPM, “General Schedule Qualification Standards: Standards by Occupational Series,” <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/classification-qualifications/general-schedule-qualification-standards/#url=Occupational-Series>.

²⁷ OPM, “Assessment and Selection,” <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/assessment-and-selection/>.

²⁸ See CRS Report 98-654, *Internships, Fellowships, and Other Work Experience Opportunities in the Federal Government*, by Christina Miracle Finch, Jennifer E. Manning, and Kathleen E. Marchsteiner.

²⁹ USAJOBS, “Events,” <https://www.usajobs.gov/Notification/Events>.

³⁰ P.L. 118-188 §2(a)(9), Chance to Compete Act of 2024, December 23, 2024 (138 Stat. 2644), located at 5 U.S.C. §101 note.

³¹ OPM, “Merit Hiring Plan.”

³² OPM, “Merit Hiring Plan.”

³³ E.O. 14356, “Ensuring Continued Accountability in Federal Hiring.” See also Office of Management and Budget and OPM, “Guidance on Executive Order 14356, *Ensuring Continued Accountability in Federal Hiring*,” memorandum, November 5, 2025, <https://www.opm.gov/chcoc/latest-memos/guidance-on-executive-order-14356-ensuring-continued-accountability-in-federal-hiring.pdf>.

evaluating the agency's current workforce and staffing needs, and they should target the agency's hiring to address critical skills gaps." Agencies are required to submit quarterly updates to these plans beginning with the second quarter of FY2026.

Analyze and Announce the Position

After deciding to fill an existing federal position or to create a new one, an agency must conduct or confirm a job analysis to identify the core duties and competencies for the position. The agency then creates and posts a vacancy announcement for the position and receives applications until the vacancy announcement closes. This phase results in an initial group of applicants who must be further evaluated to determine whether they can be considered for the position.

Conduct or Confirm the Job Analysis for the Position

Prior to recruiting for an open federal position, the agency must conduct a new job analysis for the position or approve an existing one.³⁴ A job analysis involves identifying the tasks performed in a position and the core competencies—or knowledge, skills, and abilities—needed to perform them.³⁵ For example, a duty for a contract specialist in the Department of the Interior includes performing contract negotiations, contract administration, and contract closeout. A corresponding competency for this duty appears to be listed as “contracting/procurement” in the “How You Will Be Evaluated” section of the job posting.³⁶ According to OPM, a job analysis is an integral step in the federal hiring process. Identifying the core competencies allows agencies to develop the appropriate assessment tools to evaluate applicants, which can help agencies select the best qualified candidates for the positions.³⁷

An agency does not have to conduct a new job analysis for every position it seeks to fill. The need for a new job analysis depends on the novelty of the position and the currency of the most recent job analysis for that occupation. A job analysis should be conducted when the position being filled is unlike any other position in the agency. Otherwise, the agency can review the position to determine whether a new job analysis is needed or an existing one can be used. For example, OPM guidance states that if the requirements for a position are likely to change, the agency should review the position at least annually to determine whether the existing job analysis is still valid. In contrast, agencies can often use existing job analyses for positions with relatively unchanged requirements and in which job openings recur frequently.³⁸

OPM's Merit Hiring Plan requires OPM's talent team, in collaboration with agency talent teams, to “write standardized position descriptions for the most common Federal occupations that tie to the 135 job series and grades currently covered by USA Hire assessment batteries.”³⁹ It also

³⁴ “Each employment practice of the Federal Government generally, and of individual agencies, shall be based on a job analysis to identify: (1) the basic duties and responsibilities; (2) the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to perform the duties and responsibilities; and (3) the factors that are important in evaluating candidates” (5 C.F.R. §300.103(a)).

³⁵ For more information on conducting a job analysis, see OPM, “Hiring Process Analysis Tool, Step 4: Confirm the Job Analysis and Assessment Strategy,” <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/human-capital-management/hiring-reform/hiring-process-analysis-tool/confirm-the-job-analysis-and-assessment-strategy/>; and OPM, *Delegated Examining Operations Handbook*, pp. 33-36.

³⁶ The archived version of the vacancy announcement for this position can be viewed at <https://web.archive.org/web/20220804152247/https://www.usajobs.gov/job/651210800>.

³⁷ OPM, *Delegated Examining Operations Handbook*, p. 33.

³⁸ OPM, *Delegated Examining Operations Handbook*, p. 33.

³⁹ OPM, “Merit Hiring Plan.”

requires agencies to increase the use of shared certificates, which are lists of job candidates already deemed qualified for those roles, internally and across the federal government.⁴⁰

Create and Post a Vacancy Announcement on USAJOBS.gov

Upon completing a job analysis, an agency must create a vacancy announcement for an open federal position and post the announcement on the USAJOBS.gov website. (The text below provides more information on USAJOBS.) The announcement for a federal position is prepared by staff within the agency in which the job vacancy occurs. These individuals would include human resources staff and the hiring official(s) who will be selecting the candidate.

OPM regulations codified at Section 330.104(a) of Title 5 of the *Code of Federal Regulations* prescribe the information that a vacancy announcement must include. These requirements are shown in the following text box.

Vacancy Announcement Required Information	
(1) Name of issuing agency;	(10) Basis of rating;
(2) Announcement number;	(11) What to file;
(3) Position title, series, pay plan, and grade (or pay rate);	(12) Instructions on how to apply;
(4) Duty location;	(13) Information on how to claim veterans' preference, if applicable;
(5) Number of vacancies;	(14) Definition of <i>well-qualified</i> ;
(6) Opening date and application deadline (closing date) and any other information concerning how receipt of applications will be documented (such as by date of receipt or postmark) and considered, such as by cut-off dates in open continuous announcements;	(15) Information on how candidates eligible under the Agency Career Transition Assistance Plan and the Interagency Career Transition Assistance Plan may apply, including required proof of eligibility;
(7) Qualification requirements, including knowledge, skills, and abilities or competencies;	(16) Contact person or contact point;
(8) Starting pay;	(17) Equal employment opportunity statement; and
(9) Brief description of duties;	(18) Reasonable accommodation statement.

Creating and posting a vacancy announcement on USAJOBS allows the agency to fulfill public notice requirements for civil service positions established under current law. Specifically, Section 3327 of Title 5 of the *U.S. Code* requires OPM to provide information concerning opportunities to participate in competitive examinations conducted by, or under authority delegated by, OPM to the employment offices of the U.S. Employment Service. Each agency must promptly notify OPM and these employment offices of vacant positions in the agency that are in the competitive service or the Senior Executive Service and for which the agency seeks applications from persons outside the federal service. The period during which applications will be accepted must be noted.

Section 3330 of Title 5 of the *U.S. Code* requires OPM to keep current a comprehensive list of all announcements of vacant positions in the competitive service within each agency that are to be filled by appointment for more than one year and for which applications are being (or will soon be) accepted from outside the agency's workforce. For each position, the publicly available list must include a brief description of the position (including its title, tenure, location, and rate of pay); application procedures (including the period within which applications may be submitted

⁴⁰ A hiring agency may share a competitive service certificate issued under its delegated examining authority with one or more hiring agencies for a position(s) to be filled on a permanent or term basis. See 5 C.F.R. §332.408(a)(1).

and procedures for obtaining additional information); and any other information OPM considers appropriate.

The Merit Hiring Plan issued in 2025 requires the addition of standardized language in all vacancy announcements that emphasizes that “candidates should be committed to improving the efficiency of the Federal government, passionate about the ideals of our American republic, and committed to upholding the rule of law and the United States Constitution.”⁴¹ Vacancy announcements for jobs graded at GS-5 and above are required to include four essay questions outlined in the memorandum as follows:

1. How has your commitment to the Constitution and the founding principles of the United States inspired you to pursue this role within the Federal government? Provide a concrete example from professional, academic, or personal experience.
2. In this role, how would you use your skills and experience to improve government efficiency and effectiveness? Provide specific examples where you improved processes, reduced costs, or improved outcomes.
3. How would you help advance the President’s Executive Orders and policy priorities in this role? Identify one or two relevant Executive Orders or policy initiatives that are significant to you, and explain how you would help implement them if hired.
4. How has a strong work ethic contributed to your professional, academic or personal achievements? Provide one or two specific examples, and explain how those qualities would enable you to serve effectively in this position.⁴²

Receive Applications from Job Candidates

After a job announcement is posted on USAJOBS, individuals may apply for the position. Each vacancy announcement on USAJOBS includes a section titled “How to Apply” that details the application procedures.⁴³ Typically, a candidate applies online through USAJOBS, and the application is stored in the USA Staffing system.⁴⁴ Job candidates may view their previously submitted applications and the status of any pending applications in the personal accounts they establish on USAJOBS.

Many federal agencies also include job application procedures on their publicly available websites. For example, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) provides step-by-step instructions on its “How to Apply” web page. The “Applicant Tools and Resources” section of the web page includes frequently asked questions on the application process and states that applications must be submitted electronically by using the USAJOBS Resume Builder.⁴⁵ The website includes a link to a NARA-prepared document titled “The Federal Resume Guide: What

⁴¹ OPM, “Merit Hiring Plan.” Three federal employee labor unions—the American Federation of Government Employees; the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees; and the National Association of Government Employees—filed a lawsuit against OPM on November 6, 2025, regarding these vacancy announcement questions. See Complaint, *AFGE v. Kupor*, No. 1:25-cv-13305 (D. Mass. Nov. 6, 2025).

⁴² OPM, “Merit Hiring Plan.”

⁴³ For an example of an archived job announcement, see the posting for a contract specialist at the Department of the Interior at <https://web.archive.org/web/20220804152247/https://www.usajobs.gov/job/651210800>.

⁴⁴ It is also possible for an applicant to submit required documentation via facsimile, in which case the application is transmitted to an OPM office in Macon, GA, where it is automatically submitted into the USA Staffing system.

⁴⁵ National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), “How to Apply,” <http://www.archives.gov/careers/jobs/apply.html>.

You Should Know When Applying for a Federal Career,” which provides detailed instructions on the Resume Builder.⁴⁶

OPM’s Merit Hiring Plan requires agencies to encourage users to make their resumes searchable on USAJOBS so that agency hiring managers can actively recruit candidates in addition to candidates who actively apply. Similarly, agencies are to use hiring pools and shared certificates to fill vacancies in addition to receiving new applications for vacancies.

Evaluate and Assess Job Candidates

Once the application period for a vacancy closes and the agency has received all applications, the human resources office at the agency must determine whether applicants meet the eligibility and qualification requirements for the position and rank them accordingly.⁴⁷ This is commonly referred to as the competitive rating and ranking process. *Eligibility* refers to whether an applicant is legally permitted to fill a position, whereas *qualification* refers to whether an applicant possesses the education and work experience necessary to successfully fulfill the duties of a position.⁴⁸ Eligibility does not depend on work experience, education, or skills. Agencies review eligibility before they review qualification. If applicants are ineligible, they will not be considered for the position regardless of their qualifications. This phase results in a list of applicants who can be considered for the position, as well as a subset of candidates who are deemed as best qualified for the position.

Eligibility Requirements

The agency must verify that applicants meet the minimum eligibility requirements for a position as established by OPM.⁴⁹ In most cases, an applicant must be a U.S. citizen⁵⁰ and at least (1) 18 years old or (2) 16 years old with certain educational prerequisites⁵¹ in order to be considered for a federal position. Other eligibility requirements may apply depending on the type of position being filled and the agency’s methods for filling the position.

Table 1, below, describes selected eligibility requirements that apply to certain competitive service positions.

⁴⁶ NARA, “The Federal Resume Guide,” <http://www.archives.gov/careers/jobs/forms/resume-guide.pdf>.

⁴⁷ OPM, “Hiring Process Analysis Tool, Step 8,” <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/human-capital-management/hiring-reform/hiring-process-analysis-tool/evaluate-applications/>. The order in which agencies evaluate eligibility and qualification requirements may vary.

⁴⁸ Eligibility and qualification assessments are not always distinguished from one another and are sometimes collectively referred to as a qualifications assessment or evaluation.

⁴⁹ For more information on eligibility requirements, see OPM, *Delegated Examining Operations Handbook*, p. 135, and 5 C.F.R. Part 338.

⁵⁰ 5 C.F.R. §338.101; OPM, *Delegated Examining Operations Handbook*, p. 83. In rare cases, noncitizens can be considered for competitive service positions when there is no qualified U.S. citizen.

⁵¹ OPM, “Employment FAQ,” <https://www.opm.gov/frequently-asked-questions/employment-faq/>.

Table 1. Selected Eligibility Requirements for Federal Positions

Factor	Eligibility Requirement	Example
Age	Agencies are authorized to set age requirements for certain positions, such as air traffic controller, U.S. Park Police officer, law enforcement officer, firefighter, nuclear materials courier, and customs and border protection officer. ^a The specific age requirements for some of these positions can vary by agency.	Civilian air traffic controllers are subject to a maximum entry age limit of 36 at the Department of Defense (DOD) ^b and 31 at the Federal Aviation Administration. ^c
Education	Agencies generally cannot base eligibility solely on a minimum education requirement except for scientific, technical, or professional competitive service positions that require such education. ^d	A general engineer position at DOD requires a degree in professional engineering. The curriculum must be within a school of engineering with at least one curriculum accredited by the Board of Engineering and Technology as a professional engineering curriculum or coursework in specific areas (such as differential and integral calculus). ^e
Target population	Agencies can limit eligibility to certain populations, such as current or former federal employees, employees who have been or will be subject to reductions in force, and veterans. ^f	A correctional program officer position at the Department of Justice (DOJ) is limited to current DOJ employees. ^g

Source: CRS analysis of relevant provisions in Title 5 of the *U.S. Code* and the *Code of Federal Regulations*.

Notes: The eligibility requirements described are not exhaustive. Other requirements may exist for certain positions.

- a. 5 U.S.C. §3307; 5 C.F.R. §338.601.
- b. DOD, “DOD Civilian Personnel Management System: Civilian Air Traffic Controllers,” January 26, 2015 p. 6, https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/140025/140025_vol331.pdf.
- c. Federal Aviation Administration, “Aviation Careers,” https://www.faa.gov/jobs/career_fields/aviation_careers/.
- d. 5 U.S.C. §3308.
- e. The vacancy announcement can be viewed at <https://web.archive.org/web/20250509194101/https://www.usajobs.gov/job/795677800>.
- f. OPM, “Employment FAQ,” <https://www.opm.gov/frequently-asked-questions/employment-faq/>.
- g. The vacancy announcement for the position can be viewed at <https://web.archive.org/web/20250509194406/https://www.usajobs.gov/job/836532700>.

Qualification Requirements

In addition to confirming eligibility, the agency must determine whether applicants meet the qualification requirements for a position. OPM establishes the minimum qualification requirements that agencies use to assess candidates. In general, this process involves determining whether applicants meet (1) the basic qualifications that are needed to be considered for the position and (2) any supplemental qualifications that could enhance an applicant’s performance in the position.⁵² Whereas basic qualification requirements are used to screen out unqualified applicants, supplemental qualification requirements are used to identify applicants who could be among the best qualified for the position.

Agencies use assessment tools to evaluate applicants’ qualifications. Assessment tools measure the extent to which candidates can perform some or all of the critical competencies for a position

⁵² For more information on qualification requirements, see OPM, *Delegated Examining Operations Handbook*.

identified through the job analysis.⁵³ Agencies may select the types of assessment tool to use, which can include written tests, work samples, and structured interviews, among others. OPM guidance states that an agency should select assessment tools based on several factors related to the position and operational issues, such as the competencies identified during the job analysis, expected number of applicants, and grade level of the position to be filled.⁵⁴

According to OPM, many human resources offices in federal agencies have used occupational questionnaires as their primary assessment tools in recent years.⁵⁵ An occupational questionnaire typically related to a position's qualification requirements and core competencies. Applicants were required to self-rate the extent to which they met these requirements and competencies, often on a five-point scale (e.g., 1 = lowest level of proficiency, 5 = highest level of proficiency). Applicants received scores based on their responses, which were then used in the ranking process (see below for more detail). The assessments could be entered into the USA Staffing system, which annotated each applicant's response to the assessment questions.

The Chance to Compete Act of 2024 (P.L. 118-188) required OPM to develop and implement a plan for transitioning to using technical assessments, in lieu of self-assessments, for hiring into competitive service positions. This law defines *technical assessment* as follows:

The term ‘technical assessment’ means a position-specific tool that is relevant to the position for which the tool is developed that—

(A) allows for the demonstration of job-related skills, abilities, knowledge, and competencies;

(B) is based upon a job analysis; and

(C) does not solely include or principally rely upon a self-assessment from an automated examination.⁵⁶

As of May 29, 2025, agencies were required to immediately phase out occupational questionnaires and other self-assessments for rating and ranking.⁵⁷ The Merit Hiring Plan specifies that “self-assessments may only be used for minimum qualification and eligibility determinations” unless an agency is granted express permission from OPM to use one. The Merit Hiring Plan further implements the Chance to Compete Act by requiring an agency to include at least “one technical or alternative assessment” in every hiring process across the competitive service.⁵⁸ The memorandum states that agencies can use assessments developed by the federal government or outsource them to private sector experts. The plan also provides more information on the technical and alternative assessments that agencies can adopt.

⁵³ For more information on assessment tools, see OPM, *Delegated Examining Operations Handbook*; and OPM, “Assessment and Selection.”

⁵⁴ OPM, *Delegated Examining Operations Handbook*, p. 41; OPM, “Hiring Process Analysis Tool, Step 4: Confirm the Job Analysis and Assessment Strategy.”

⁵⁵ For more information on the occupational questionnaire, see OPM, “Occupational Questionnaires,” <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/assessment-and-selection/occupational-questionnaires/>; and OPM, “Assessment Policy FAQ,” <https://www.opm.gov/frequently-asked-questions/assessment-policy-faq/>.

⁵⁶ P.L. 118-188 §2(a)(9), Chance to Compete Act of 2024, December 23, 2024 (138 Stat. 2644), located at 5 U.S.C. §101 note.

⁵⁷ OPM, “Merit Hiring Plan,” p. 8.

⁵⁸ OPM, “Merit Hiring Plan,” p. 10.

Rank Qualified Candidates

After identifying qualified candidates for the position, the agency must rank candidates according to their qualifications.⁵⁹ In this step, the agency identifies the group of candidates who are best qualified for the position. Agencies have used several systems of rating and ranking candidates over the years.

Beginning in 2010, agencies were required to rank applicants using the *category rating system*.⁶⁰ Under this method, candidates without veterans' preference⁶¹ were placed into different quality categories based on their performance on the assessment tools created for the position (e.g., best qualified, well-qualified, qualified).⁶² A final candidate for the position was chosen from the highest quality category. Agencies were required to establish at least two quality categories and could not include a "not qualified" category,⁶³ and the categories must have been structured to include candidates with similar levels of proficiency on job-related competencies.⁶⁴ They could, however, establish as many categories as they deemed fit and could define the criteria for placing candidates in those categories. Typically, those criteria were based on either *quantitative* or *qualitative* data from assessment tools.

The Merit Hiring Plan requires agencies to use a new ranking and rating system called the *rule of many*, which was first introduced in the FY2019 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 115-232). This change was formalized via a final rule on September 8, 2025.⁶⁵ This system combines elements of the category ranking system with a predecessor system called the *rule of three*.⁶⁶ Under the rule-of-many system as described by the memorandum, an agency is to "establish minimum passing scores for assessments (i.e., cut scores) to certify a sufficient number of candidates to the hiring manager." These scores can be established based on "the assessment used (as validated by job analysis data), based on business necessity (for efficiency), or based on a set number or percentage of eligible applicants."

Select the Job Candidate

Once all candidates have been rated and ranked, the agency can begin the process of selecting a final candidate for the position. Unless veterans' preference applies, hiring officials may extend a

⁵⁹ For more information on ranking, see OPM, *Delegated Examining Operations Handbook*, pp. 105-115.

⁶⁰ A 2010 presidential memorandum directed agencies to use only the category rating system to rank job candidates. Previously, agencies were permitted to use the numerical rating system to rank candidates. For more information on the numerical rating method, see 5 U.S.C. §§3317-3318 and 5 C.F.R. Part 337, Subpart A. The archived presidential memorandum can be accessed at <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/presidential-memorandum-improving-federal-recruitment-and-hiring-process>.

⁶¹ Veterans' preference is a system that provides special consideration to certain former members of the Armed Forces who pursue civilian employment with the federal government. For more information, see CRS Report R44652, *Federal Government Employment: Veterans' Preference in Competitive Examination*, by Benjamin Collins.

⁶² For more information on the category rating system, see 5 U.S.C. §3319; 5 C.F.R. Part 337, Subpart C; and OPM, "The President's Hiring Reform Initiative: Category Rating," <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/human-capital-management/hiring-reform/reference/hrspecialisttraining.pdf>.

⁶³ OPM, "The President's Hiring Reform Initiative: Category Rating," p. 6.

⁶⁴ OPM, "Competitive Hiring," <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/hiring-authorities/competitive-hiring/>.

⁶⁵ OPM, "Reinvigorating Merit-Based Hiring Through Candidate Ranking in the Competitive and Excepted Service (Rule of Many)," 90 *Federal Register* 43135, September 8, 2025, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/09/08/2025-17125/reinvigorating-merit-based-hiring-through-candidate-ranking-in-the-competitive-and-excepted-service>.

⁶⁶ The category rating system replaced the rule of three in 2010. For more information on the rule of three, see Merit Systems Protection Board, *The Rule of Three in Federal Hiring: Boon or Bane?*, December 1995, https://www.mspb.gov/studies/studies/The_Rule_of_Three_in_Federal_Hiring_Boon_or_Bane_253660.pdf.

job offer to any individual in the highest quality category.⁶⁷ Typically, the selection process is as follows:

1. All candidates in the highest quality category are referred to the hiring official at a department or agency for consideration as a final candidate.⁶⁸
2. Hiring officials review the candidates' applications and select candidates to interview for the position.
3. Hiring officials schedule and conduct interviews.
4. Hiring officials identify the best candidate(s) based on the interview process and select a final candidate for the position.⁶⁹
5. A job offer is extended to the final candidate, which may be accepted or declined.

Agencies possess broad discretion over selection procedures, which are largely governed by internal agency policy rather than federal statutes or regulations.⁷⁰ Regarding interviews, agencies independently decide the number of applicants to interview, the number of interviews to conduct, and interview questions.⁷¹ For instance, one agency may decide to interview 10 applicants and conduct one interview with each applicant, whereas another agency may interview two applicants and conduct two interviews with each applicant. Regarding selection, the agency decides the number of people to consider as finalists, the criteria used to identify the final candidate, and the decision process for selecting the final candidate.

Potential Issues for Congressional Oversight

Individuals comprising the federal competitive service carry out day-to-day government functions and implement federal policy. As a result, topics related to the federal hiring process present potential opportunities for congressional oversight and legislative action. In addition, workforce-shaping actions pursued by the second Trump Administration may have implications for the federal hiring process. These topics may include

- the Trump Administration's hiring freeze;
- developments related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility in the federal workforce; and
- the use of skills-based assessments in the federal hiring process.

⁶⁷ 5 U.S.C. §3319(c).

⁶⁸ When there are fewer than three candidates in the highest quality category, agencies may combine the highest quality category with the next lower quality category and make selections from the newly merged category. The newly merged category becomes the new highest quality category. See 5 U.S.C. §3319(c)(1) and OPM, "The President's Hiring Reform Initiative: Category Rating," pp. 5 and 33-35.

⁶⁹ For more information on the selection process, see OPM, "Hiring Process Analysis Tool, Step 10" at <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/human-capital-management/hiring-reform/hiring-process-analysis-tool/review-applications-schedule-and-conduct-interviews-check-references-make-selection-and-return-certificate/>.

⁷⁰ OPM has issued broad guidance on the selection process, which appears to grant agencies broad discretion to determine how the process will be implemented. For example, OPM directs agencies to follow their internal policies conducting interviews.

⁷¹ OPM has developed guidance for developing and administering structured interviews. See OPM, *Structured Interviews: A Practical Guide*, September 2008, <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/assessment-and-selection/structured-interviews/guide.pdf>.

Hiring Freeze

Generally, agencies have discretion to make decisions regarding their staffing needs and, within the contours of their budgets, are able to hire personnel as needed. On January 20, 2025, President Trump issued a memorandum that initiated a freeze on federal civilian hiring.⁷² This memorandum states that “no Federal civilian position that is vacant at noon on January 20, 2025, may be filled, and no new position may be created except as otherwise provided for in this memorandum or other applicable law.” This impacts the federal hiring process by halting, with certain exceptions, the agency actions described in this report that are taken to fill vacancies or to establish new positions. Military personnel and personnel in immigration enforcement, national security, and public safety are excepted from the freeze established by the memorandum.

President Trump published E.O. 14210, “Implementing the President’s ‘Department of Government Efficiency’ Workforce Optimization Initiative,” on February 11, 2025.⁷³ This E.O. required the director of the Office of Management and Budget to develop a “plan to reduce the size of the Federal Government’s workforce through efficiency improvements and attrition.” It also stated that this plan shall require agencies to hire no more than one person for every four employees who separate from their positions. On April 17, 2025, President Trump issued two subsequent memoranda extending the hiring freeze through July 15, 2025, and October 15, 2025, respectively.⁷⁴

Congress may consider the potential impacts of this hiring freeze on agencies’ capacities to fulfill their missions. Congress may also have an interest in narrowing or expanding the list of occupations excepted from the hiring freeze.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Federal Workforce

The executive branch’s approach to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)—which is sometimes referred to as diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA)—in the federal workforce has differed across presidential Administrations. President Trump issued E.O. 14151 titled “Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing” on January 20, 2025.⁷⁵ This E.O. sought to end DEI programs throughout the federal government. On January 21, 2025, President Trump issued an additional E.O. titled “Ending Illegal Discrimination and Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity,” which, among other things, revoked numerous executive orders issued by previous Administrations that were deemed to be DEIA-related.⁷⁶

⁷² Executive Office of the President, “Hiring Freeze,” 90 *Federal Register* 8247, January 20, 2025, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/01/28/2025-01905/hiring-freeze>.

⁷³ E.O. 14210, “Implementing the President’s ‘Department of Government Efficiency’ Workforce Optimization Initiative,” 90 *Federal Register* 9669, February 11, 2025, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/02/14/2025-02762/implementing-the-presidents-department-of-government-efficiency-workforce-optimization-initiative>.

⁷⁴ White House, “Extension of Hiring Freeze,” April 17, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/04/extension-of-hiring-freeze/>; and White House, “Ensuring Accountability and Prioritizing Public Safety in Federal Hiring,” July 7, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/07/ensuring-accountability-and-prioritizing-public-safety-in-federal-hiring/>.

⁷⁵ E.O. 14151, “Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing,” 90 *Federal Register* 8339, January 29, 2025, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/01/29/2025-01953/ending-radical-and-wasteful-government-dei-programs-and-preferencing>.

⁷⁶ E.O. 14173, “Ending Illegal Discrimination and Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity,” 90 *Federal Register* 8633, January 31, 2025, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/01/31/2025-02097/ending-illegal-discrimination-and-restoring-merit-based-opportunity>.

These developments represent a change in course from earlier Administrations' DEIA-related actions. For instance, President Joe Biden issued E.O. 13985, "Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government," on January 20, 2021, which directed federal agencies to pursue a comprehensive approach to advancing equity.⁷⁷ Later, on June 25, 2021, President Biden issued E.O. 14035, titled "Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in the Federal Workforce," which mandated that the federal government "remove barriers to equal opportunity" to enhance its ability to recruit, hire, develop, promote, and retain talented individuals and to act as a model employer for DEIA.⁷⁸ The Trump Administration rescinded E.O. 13985 and E.O. 14035.⁷⁹

If Congress chooses to consider options for legislation, it could codify any of the aforementioned administrative approaches to DEI/DEIA into law. Congress may have an interest in statutorily defining DEI/DEIA to facilitate its expansion or restriction in the federal workforce. In addition, Congress may choose to conduct oversight into how different approaches to DEI/DEIA have impacted federal hiring.

Executive Order 13932 and Skills-Based Assessments

In recent years, the executive branch has emphasized skills- and competency-based assessments in the federal hiring process. Congress, the Trump Administration, and the Biden Administration have demonstrated an interest in removing unnecessary education requirements for some jobs and replacing them with skills-based assessments during the hiring process. On June 26, 2020, President Trump issued E.O. 13932, which sought to replace potentially unnecessary education qualifications with skills- and competency-based hiring techniques to assess some job candidates.⁸⁰

The Chance to Compete Act of 2024 (P.L. 118-188) furthered this shift toward skills-based assessments by requiring OPM to develop and implement a plan for transitioning to technical assessments for hiring into competitive service positions.⁸¹ Subsequently, in 2025, the Merit Hiring Plan required agencies to cease self-assessments and occupational questionnaires to rate and rank candidates. Instead, an agency must use at least one technical or alternative assessment to evaluate candidates for any competitive service position.⁸²

⁷⁷ E.O. 13985, "Advancing Radical Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government," 86 *Federal Register* 7009, January 25, 2021, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2021/01/25/2021-01753/advancing-racial-equity-and-support-for-underserved-communities-through-the-federal-government>.

⁷⁸ E.O. 14035, "Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in the Federal Workforce," 86 *Federal Register* 34593, June 25, 2021, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2021/06/30/2021-14127/diversity-equity-inclusion-and-accessibility-in-the-federal-workforce>.

⁷⁹ CRS Insight IN12497, *Recent Executive Actions on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)*, by Taylor N. Riccard.

⁸⁰ E.O. 13932, "Modernizing and Reforming the Assessment and Hiring of Federal Job Candidates," 85 *Federal Register* 39457, June 26, 2020, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2020/07/01/2020-14337/modernizing-and-reforming-the-assessment-and-hiring-of-federal-job-candidates>.

⁸¹ P.L. 118-188 §2(a)(9), Chance to Compete Act of 2024, December 23, 2024 (138 Stat. 2644), located at 5 U.S.C. §101 note.

⁸² OPM, "Merit Hiring Plan."

Some observers have raised concerns that the Merit Hiring Plan may pose implementation challenges for agencies.⁸³ If Congress were to consider options for legislation, it could require OPM to review agency implementation of the Merit Hiring Plan, including any effects on the merit system, and report the findings to Congress. Congress may also consider amending the Chance to Compete Act to address potential challenges associated with its implementation.

Author Information

Taylor N. Riccard
Analyst in Government Organization and
Management

Barbara L. Schwemle
Analyst in American National Government

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⁸³ Raymond Limon, "Trump's New Civil Service Hiring Plan: Merit or Meritless?," *Government Executive*, June 9, 2025, <https://www.govexec.com/management/2025/06/trumps-new-civil-service-hiring-plan-merit-or-meritless/405892/>.